

Band-Aid

by madotsucky

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Summary: Chell's escaped Aperture, but her adventure's not over yet. Everything's taken its toll, and even with her tremendous ability of shoving problems to places where she can deal with them later, she can't hide forever. She can feel herself unraveling at the seams. But when a certain old friend returns from space, she can't help but wonder: can a Band-Aid really mend a broken heart?

1. Crashed To Earth

The sky was beautiful out here.

I'd forgotten about what a luxury the sky was. It was always shifting, changing, free. It could tell you what the weather was like, and there were too many shapes in the clouds to count.

I hated it. It symbolized freedom from my own personal Hell, but all I saw when I looked at it I saw him. Especially at nighttime. When the stars twinkled bright and I could see past the thin veil of the blue stratosphere, blue like- _nodon'tgothereyou'llgethurt- _out into space itself. And the moon, a perfect sphere tonight. Because I could almost imagine, zooming around the moon, orbiting it, a tiny, Aperture regulation gray metal talking eyeball. A stupid, selfish, monstrous, power-mad, British talking eyeball.

I bet he wasn't even sorry. I bet he was sitting out in space, fuming at me, for not letting him pull himself back in. For not sacrificing everything for him, like I had been doing ever since I met him. One last sacrifice. A body in between him and his troubles.

I tried not to look at the sky.

There were plenty of other things to look at out here anyway. Deer, rabbits, the occasional dead head crab. The more occasional live headcrab.

And every night I heard his voice in my dreams.

And every day his _noholdoncatchmecatchmecatchm eeee_- faithplating around my brain at ridiculous speeds, distracting me, stopping me from getting kill, food I needed to survive. Even out in space, he was still a horrible nuisance and _I missed him. _I missed his stupid accented prattle so much it _hurt. _Loneliness is processed in the same brain zone that processes physical pain. And I could feel the want, the longing for company, even stupid, horrible, mean, selfish _eyeball _company. It was someone taking a chisel and hammering tiny needles of ice into my heart.

A tiny crunching noise sounded from outside. I snapped out of my stupor, stiffening and spinning to face the noise dead-on. The companion cube quietly chirruped at me. I peered through the grimy window pane, around the red flannel makeshift patch over a hole the size of my fist. The ferns outside the window rustled in the breeze. My muscles relaxed, and one hand idly stroked its battered surface before I collapsed at the table. I sat in the splintering chair, staring across from me at the empty one on the other side of the table. I imagined him propped up across from me, handles idly flexing as he talked about one thing or another. His stratosphere-blue optic spun, glanced off me and twirled again, flicking around the room in it's usual panicked hyperactive state. But in the second he was looking at me, I swore his face moved a little, enough to maybe express the hint of a _smile_-

God, I was pathetic. Fantasizing about a stupid robot who tried to murder me was perfectly healthy. My laugh rang out like a harsh bark. I stared at the camping cot set up in the corner for a moment. I didn't want to sleep. But I had to if I wanted to wake with the dawn and patch up the hole in the roof before the rainy season. The last rain had been a downpour, drenching a corner of the rundown cabin. If I could only get up there somehowâ€¦|

I found myself in bed. I supposed I had blacked out and my body had carried me there. It was nice to know someone was looking out for my tired, harassed and scrambled brain. I could hear crickets chirp around me, the companion cube was humming to itself, and the whole cabin creaked in the slight earth tremors from down below. The peaceful silence was shattered by a loud _boom_, and a _crack_. I rolled out of bed, hitting the floor full on with my knees slamming into the wood. I scrambled up, ignoring my joints complaints and peered through the film of grime on the window facing the wheat field. Facing Aperture. Flames licked at the sky for a second. Oily smoke slashed a dark gray ribbon across the pristine violet sky. It looked filthy and ugly, blotting out the starlight. The flames died down.

I don't know how long I sat there, looking for an indication, something, anything that might explain why, all of a sudden, Aperture was active again. Eventually I crawled into bed and pulled the sheets up tight to my chin, trying to forget.

For the next two days nothing happened. No robots descended from the wheat fields just down the hill, no Combine attacked, no more explosions rumbled and shook the ground. The world was eerily silent, like it was holding its breath, waiting for something, anything to happen.

The storm hit on the first night. The wind howled and lashed at the shack's thin walls with all its elemental fury, snarled like wolves around the corners, threatening to rip this shaky building into toothpicks. In from the hole in the roof poured a deluge, soaking the floor of the tiny cabin, making my feet sodden when I stepped on it and most undoubtedly rotting the wood through. I lay in my bed, afraid that suddenly the hut would stop sheltering me and I would be whisked away into the sky, ripped away from my bed and my home and my lifeâ€¦

The next morning everything froze over. The world was an ice slick, a shining layer of slippery white covered everything. Huge icicles hung from the hole in the ceiling.

They had all melted by the time evening came.

The weather was unpredictable and volatile after what we had done to this planet. Everything was off-kilter, not enough to shut off but enough to be shaky and scary and insane. We were lucky to all have our lives. I wasn't the only survivor, but I was the most physically healthy one. I had spent my life sheltered in a facility whered all I was doing was exercise all day, running and jumping and spinning, like a pet on a hamster wheel, and so I was physically fit to live out here, but mentally I was a train wreck.

When I first left Aperture I wandered for days. Past the wheat fields, up this hill, past the shack and straight into a settlement. It was just a small trading outpost, fifty people at most lived in the little ramshackle runs of a town, but they were kind and helped me get supplies.

I had to leave the cube outside of town, though. When I first came into town carrying it, everyone screamed and hid and refused to go near me. Technology had been their downfall. They hated it. They only agreed to help me if it wasn't in their line of sight.

Long story short, I had worked for a few weeks to earn clothes and a gun. Another few days for firing lessons. Another few for supplies to help me survive out in the backwoods. And then I said goodbye to the kind people of Houghton, heaved the cube back up onto my back and hiked back to the cabin. I lived there for the next four months, and in all that time there had never been a storm this bad.

It made me wonder where it came from.

As I tossed and turned in bed that night, twisted in the sweaty sheets, a dark, filthy figure stumbled through the woods, struggling to keep up a pace. Its long limbs reached for the trees around it, scrambling for footholds with its feet, stumbling and cursing and basically waking up every nocturnal creature in the area. Its eyes swiveled around the forest, trying to peer through shattered glasses. In one hand it clutched a tiny gray box. The other was pressed to its stomach, trying to hold in the flow of blood from a gash on its side. Tiny little huffs of pain escaped its lips, and a torrent of tears wet its face and stained its shirt and showed no sign of stopping. Eventually its shaky legs gave up on it and it finally fell, limbs bumping together as it collapsed on my doorstep.

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I woke.

I don't know what caused it. One moment I was asleep, in oblivion, finally devoid of the dreams that plagued my nights. And then my eyes snapped open like they did back There. One second asleep, the next awake. A snap transition, like swinging the gun around and hearing the spine-grating, unnatural _bloop_ noise of an opening portal. Lately I'd taken to getting out of bed slowly, relishing the slowness and laziness of it, the ability to stretch my muscles and blink groggily before getting up and cutting myself a misshapen slice of my lumpy bread for breakfast.

But today was different. I was on edge again. Balanced on the tip of a knife. I whipped up. My feet clomped onto the floor. I grabbed my boots and threw them on. Something was grating at the edge of my hearing, something was off. Like the sharp hint of ozone in the air, almost intangible, but still there. I sensed a presence. I could almost hear somebody's slow, measured breathing-

A tiny snore slid through the heavy door. I stiffened. The small noise jangled on my tense nerves, and I nearly cried out in surprise. My fingers fumbled for the doorknob. I heard something outside, something scrambling on the planks, heavy breathing, hands scrambling for my handle. I yanked it open first.

A tall body slammed into me. I closed my eyes upon impact as I was thrown to the floor, something heavy on top of me. I was down, smothered by a flurry of long limbs and heavy gasps. And then two large hands clamped themselves on either side of my face. My eyes snapped open, and I responded immediately, yanking the hands off, sliding out from under them, and scuttling away, backwards on my hands and knees. There was a gasp. Two round blue eyes opened, almost perfect circles in a face almost completely smeared with dirt, except for two wet tear tracks falling from each eye. The eyes were blue-crayon blue, opening portal blue, stratosphere-

And in that second, even before he opened his mouth, I knew who he was.

No, no, _no. _This wasn't right. He was gone. I tried to keep my heart from leaping out of my chest with joy. _He was alive, he was okay- _But how? The only person with the ability and the processing power to contact him and possibly get him back was GLaDOS, but what did she want with him? HE shouldn't be here.

He was fast, scrambling forward and grabbing my face again. His features crumpled into a fist, a ball of muscle, and emotion flickered across its surface so fast I couldn't recognize it.

"You." He whispered. I tensed for an attack.

"You're aliveâ€|" We said at the same time. Before I could even process the information, He snatched me up and pulled me to his chest. His entire body shook. Twitched, even. A hand stroked my hair. All I could do was sit there.

"She told me you were deadâ€|" He whispered. And then I felt a drop of moisture on my cheek. He was crying. All I could think to do was wrap my arms around his neck and hug back. I was in comfort mode. I

wasn't thinking about Back There and what he did. I was thinking about how happy I was to see him alive. Andâ€¦ Human?

And I buried my face in his chest and cried too. I hadn't cried in That Place. I couldn't. I couldn't show weakness to the monstrous cameras around every turn, even if I wanted to. I had wanted to cry when he betrayed me. I had wanted to when he was ripped away from me and the only sentient thing in There had disappeared into the void. Even if he had taken every chance to hurt me. He was the only one who had cared. For a while, at least

It took me a while to realize he was talking. Blathering, really, nothing much more than incoherent nonsense.

"Sorry. Sorry. I am so, so sorry. I really am." His voice was rough and gravelly. His long, thin fingers continued to idly stroke my hair. I didn't look at him. I couldn't look at him.

"I'm an idiot, I'm stupid, and I'm so sorry. Really, truly am." My fingers dug into his back. He thought apologies could fix things. Nothing could fix this.

"H-hey? Uh, lady? Funny, your name never came up- Are you okay? Talk to me."

I shook my head. I didn't want to. I didn't want to even be near this horrible monster-

What was I doing?

I wrenched myself out of his grip, shivering. The sudden lack of body heat was surprising, and the chilly air swirled around my skin.

"Lady? You all right?" He looked at me like I had just stepped on a puppy.

Didn't he understand? A little sorry was like a band-aid. Fine for a scratch or a bump, but it wasn't going to fix the fact that my heart had been ripped into pieces and spat on.

Of course he didn't understand. He was a robot. The world revolved around him. Didn't he see his actions had consequences?

Six months after Aperture, I was horrible, bloody mangled mess of a person and had just begun to put myself back together, without his stupid band-aid. With stitches made of confidence and strength and a lot of shutting up and sticking it out when all I wanted to die was curl up and die. I could be fine without him barging back here and thinking his apology did something.

He clasped his hands, looking for all the world that he was praying to a god, and a torrent of words gushed from his mouth yet again, taking everything I had done in stride, still trying to convince me.

"I'll do anything. I won't be a nuisance. I just want to be here, okay? I can help you out. Ah, I canâ€¦ well, I can hack, that's something, do you need anything hacked? And I canâ€¦ Provide moral support! It must be awfully lonely out here with nothing to do, I

mean I know if I was out here I'd be lonely, wouldn't you like some company?" I looked at him. He inched forward and his hand slid over mine.

"I'll do anything, okay? Please. You're all I could think about in space." I could feel my resolve crumble. And he stared at me, his stupid, unrealistically blue eyes piercing into my soul, and I stood up.

I opened the windows to let the fresh air in. Gently, knowing he was breakable, I lifted him up and helped him walk over to the table. I sat him in the chair. The Chair. The seat that I never sat in. Because every time I sat down at that table, he was sitting across from me, in that very seat, chuckling and prattling, his banter echoing in my very bones. And finally, he was occupying it, staring at me like I was insane and I probably was. But I really didn't think he wanted to hurt me.

He gasped and winced as I sat him down, and I noticed there was a huge gash down his side, a barely healed, bloody chasm of a thing that made me wonder why he hadn't passed out from blood loss.

"oh, yeah. That thing? It hurts- not really quite sure what's going on there to be honest, ah-" I reached under the sink, grabbing a bottle of disinfectant from the medical kit neatly taped down to the bottom of the cabinet.

I turned back to him, grabbing the zipper of his Aperture-regulation orange jumpsuit. He stared at me. I yanked the shirt part off and stared at the cut. It was red and swollen and the skin around it was shiny. I put one hand on his shoulder to brace him and started methodically swabbing at it with disinfectant on a cotton ball.

His scream hit a couple octaves only bats could hear. One of his big hands jerked up, pushing mine away.

"What'd you do that for? That _hurt_!" I glared up at him and went back to swabbing at it. He hissed in pain but kept his mouth shut. I smiled quietly to myself. I suppose you could think of it as payback.

I tried to think of all the ways he could be useful. He was tall, he could probably help fix the roof. That was something.

I found myself considering his words. Moral support. His voice had kept me sane in those long, dark, twisted hallways and during those long, dark, twisted times. and here was another time I needed support. It was a coincidence. Almost too good to be true. But I shoved that thought to the back of my mind.

I hated to say godsend, but that was really what he was.

2. Peekaboo!

I pushed the jumpsuit off his shoulders, yanked it down past his hips. I held the filthy orange was of fabric in my arms, wanting to pitch it off into the woods like I had with mine. Instead, I submerged it in the pond, watching the dirt spiral and bubble away, before starting to scrub with both hands and a bar of lumpy pink

homemade soap. He leaned over me, shivering in his underwear.

I looked up at him. He blinked, arranging his glasses on his nose like half the glass hadn't already fallen out and he could still see with them on. I sighed and turned back around, trying to get all the blood out of the shockingly tangerine fabric. He leaned further over me, until his chin was almost touching my shoulder. A tiny grumble of annoyance rose from my throat.

I pointed to the water. He looked at me quizzically.

"I- I can't understand you, love." I tried to ignore that my heart skipped a beat at the word _love _and grabbed his wrist. I jerked his arm towards the water, towing him forward a little bit. I hoped he'd get the hint and continued to try and clean the jumpsuit. Eventually the blood had dissolved to a pale brown, rusty stain and I spread the jumpsuit out on the grass to dry in the sunshine.

I turned to see him standing by the water, looking down at his feet. I sighed. I jabbed one finger into his chest, the other to the pond.

"Wheatleyâ€|" He said, pointing to his chest, as if unsure that was what I wanted. I just rolled my eyes. I had left my pad of paper at home, and anyway I didn't have a pen- I'd put that on the list of things to buy when I went to town. Deciding I needed a wash anyway, I stepped behind a log and yanked off my t-shirt and my jeans. Hanging them on a branch, I quickly stepped to the shore and jumped into the water. Forgetting how far down the pond went, I kicked hard for the surface, breaking the water with a gasp and quickly treading with my feet.

He stared at me moment. I gestured him forward.

"With all due respect, uh, lady- I really don't want to, uh- do that." I looked up at him. I gestured him forward again.

"Well, you see, I don't really know how to swimâ€|" I cursed inside my head. Launching myself forward in the water by a few strong kicks, I grabbed at his wrist and pulled him in.

He screeched and flailed a moment before realizing the water was shallow. He cleared his throat, puffing out his chest a bit.

"It's-ah, not that badâ€| water's bloody freezing, thoughâ€|" He muttered. I laughed. I swam over to the other bank and grabbed the soap.

"So, this is what humans do to get clean, huh?" I looked sidelong at him.

"So they don't smell, eh? Clever, very clever. You humans aren't so bad. Nothing a little cleansing tank wash couldn't fix though, in my opinion." I nodded, more to shut him up than anything, starting to rub the soap on my arms. After rubbing it idly into my hair, I handed it to him. He stared at it a moment.

"Uh, you know, I missed the seminar on this- I never really learned this whole _soap _business, honestly- It's not like I was peering

into the test subject's showers like _hallo, oh that's interesting, mind if I do your back, _you know, because that would be weird and all." I tried very hard not to giggle.

"Hey, what's so funny? Aren't you glad you didn't have a little talking eyeball peering into your bathroom? Well, you were being monitored in there, so I suppose you did-" He mused, soap forgotten in his hand. I raised an eyebrow at him.

"F-for security reasons, of course, it's not like a-anyone was, uh, peeping, it was just to make sure you didn't try any funny business-" The eyebrow arched higher on my forehead. His entire face went cherry red.

Soap still in one hand, he stuck his arms out, gesticulating wildly._._

"N-no, i didn't mean it like _that, _I just meant-" He clapped his hands over his burning cheeks. I grabbed the soap from him and drew a soapy line down the centre of his chest, rubbing all the dirt away. I splashed handfuls of water over him.

"Thanksâ€¦" He mumbled, dribbling cold water onto his face to try and stop the mounting blush.

Eventually, I turned him around. As swaths of dirt dissolved into the pond, A small metal thing, embedded in the back of his skull came into view. It was almost like a panel, a circular panel with a little Aperture logo and two tiny screws holding it in place. I ran my thumb over the carved surface, and he jumped.

"Hey!" His entire body tensed, and tiny sparks jumped from the plate, snapping into my fingers with a little fizzle.

"What are you _doing _back there?" I didn't touch it again, but eyed it suspiciously. Turning him around for a final time, I pulled his face down and started to scrub.

"Uh-thanks, by the wayâ€¦ Lady. Are you ever gonna tell me your name?" I shrugged. He blinked soap out of his eyes. His skin was pretty pale, like he hadn't been getting any sunlight. He had dark blond hair, the color of old, tired beach sand and tiny square old-man glasses that perched neatly on his nose.

He had to be at least six foot two, with huge hands and feet and long, gangly legs. He grinned down at me like a little boy, like the pure abject happiness you see when a child watches his parent reappear from behind their hands, shouting: _Peekaboo!_

I smiled back. I wasn't exactly sure I trusted him, but the innocence with which he approached everything made me worry. What would happen if he encountered some Combine? They still existed. We hadn't eradicated them completely from the planet. Little pockets of the things hid in dark, moist caves and attacked humans that came near. I knew how to shoot a gun, but I couldn't protect both of us with an old two-barrel shotgun.

And a little niggling thought at the back of my mind: What would the citizens of Houghton think of my new friend?

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"I don't like this, you're gonna fall." He squirmed under my weight, trying to hoist me up to the roof. I caught the edge of the rough tiles with my fingertips, scraping them a bit but holding on, and managed to haul myself up. He gave me a bit of a boost at the end, and then I was sitting on the roof. I reached down a hand for the thatch supplies, and he passed me up the leaves and branches.

"You know what would work wonderfully with this? A spot of moss. Hang tight up there, this won't be a minute!" He chirped, scuttling off.

I sat on the roof, looking at the sky. It looked less ugly today. It finally became the thing it was meant to be: a symbol of everything I had sacrificed. I had sacrificed everything I had to get to this sky, and I was going to damn well enjoy it.

The blue sky was slashed through with patterns of dark green foliage from the surrounding trees, and every once in a while a cloud would scuttle its way across, waving merrily as it sailed on, free as a bird.

Unlike me.

I had been trapped by walls before. I has been trapped by walls my whole life. But now that I wasn't surrounded by walls, I had other limitations. I was trapped by my fears. And they were just as good as any damn walls and twice as solid. It seemed like no matter what happened to me, I was always going to be held back. Because maybe I, deep down, didn't believe I could do it.

My whole life, I had Her voice at my back, that niggling sliver of doubt, telling me I wasn't good enough, I wasn't going to amount to anything. That I was ugly, fat, and those insults glanced off my armor at first, but soon buried me under a pile of cruel words and broken promises.

Everyone broke their promises. Him telling me we would escape, all Her lies and deceptions. Nobody kept them, they weren't precious anymore. Promise was a loose term, one you could toss around with the wind. People threw promises away like so much garbage.

He returned with a large patch of moss. He nudged it against my foot.

"Oi! I'm back! Did you miss me?" A carefree laugh that I didn't return, but he steam rolled right on, undeterred by my silence as I patched up the hole with the moss.

"Funny thing- I saw something on my way back. Odd little fellow, about the size of a dog, maybe? And it's got no eyes, either- weird bopper. I was just walking along with the moss, minding my own business, when-whoop! There he was! Smack dab, right in the middle of the path, eating-get this- a _deer_! Not a small one, either! Blimey, these things're mad!"

I looked over at him. He had seen a headcrab? I thought there were none in the area. A cold coil of dread settled deep in the pit of my stomach. He was prattling on, completely oblivious to everything but

the sound of his own voice.

"Crazy, hunh?" He asked me. I nodded, slowly. I spread an old blanket over my thatchwork. It looked slightly lumpy, but I hammered down the corners and it should hold-at least until I could trade for some new roof tiles. I slid my legs off the roof, and he opened his arms. I dropped right into them, smacking the breath right out of the both of us with a whump. That childlike grin shone again, and he continued to carry me as he walked back around to the front of the cabin.

I squirmed, kicked a bit, and as his shaky hold loosened, I settled for clinging tighter to his neck and praying he didn't drop me.

"What've you been eating, bricks?" He grunted in my ear. I nodded.

"Wouldn't surprise me." He muttered. I laughed. It sounded odd. Different. For once it wasn't a cynical barking noise. It was still gravelly and scarred from disuse, but it sounded lighter than it had before. Happier.

Moral support indeed.

3. Say Apple

The cabin air was stuffy with the heat of the stove and the fireplace going at once. The air was hot and oppressive, but in a way that made me feel in control as I had my big oven mitts on, sliding the pan further into the wood-burning oven built in to the side of the house. I was the boss here. I could tame the fire. Even if it was a puny, contained fire, it was still a small victory. A teeny-tiny microscopic victory over fear and the sick feeling in the pit of my stomach whenever I thought of That Place, but I was going to take whatever I could salvage from the derailed train that was my psyche.

I wasn't really looking at him, but was I ever? I was too busy working on my own task, only had the corner of my eye on him.

His hands were stretched out in front of him. He sat cross-legged in the mat in front of the fireplace, staring transfixedly into the flames. I inhaled. I smelled what he smelled. It was fire that carried the rich undertones of wood and the sharp scent of charcoal, not Aperture fire, which smelled of oil and ozone and chemicals so volatile they didn't even have a place on the periodic table. Everything was different out here. Even fire, an element I thought I had down, mastered, having had to deal with it my whole life, was different. It made me wonder what would happen if She came out here. Would She be different too? Would she lose the sharp edge to her voice, the ozone crackling through her wires, the sharp edge of danger that I associated with her massive chassis swinging gracefully around?

Would her cruel taunts cease?

Probably not.

Before I could stop him, Wheatley, engrossed in the new flame, leaned

a little too close, one of his fingers gently brushing the flame, a simple caress. But fire isn't going to let you pet it. The fire crackled and spat, and he screeched like a little girl and yanked his hand away. He lifted up onto his toes, shaking his hand fervently and whimpering. My head whipped around in surprise.

And then I realized. He was torn out of his world. Ripped from a place with rules, with ugly gray corners and uglier gray walls, where the only splashes of color came from one mad test subject and his arsenal of spray cans. For all he knew, fire here smelled different, maybe it purred like a kitten when you touched it. Grass didn't grow down there. For all he knew, it was carpet.

And I saw the man underneath the cheery façade. A man ripped like a scab from a giant limb, left on the ground shivering and shaking and no longer a part of something big and important, now just a scared little robot in a body he barely knew how to use. A poor, confused little robot who had crashed back down to earth just to help me and apologize, and I was wondering what was in it for me?

I was still so far from forgiving him, though.

Not as far as I had been when he first came, but still miles and miles away, so far he was only a dot on the horizon, and I knew that I'd never really reach him until I got up and walked there.

I sort of looked at him a while. He glanced over at me. He clamped his palm around the injured thumb, wincing but smiling through it.

"Ah, nothing. Nothing I can't- ah, handle." My heart dropped into my chest. It took all my self-control not to enfold him in my arms like the big damn baby he was. Instead, I turned back to the apple I was chopping up.

"Just, out of curiosity- where do you keep your burn ointment? Just for future reference, have absolutely no idea why I'd need it, just trying to, you know, familiarize myself with the place, because I'll be here a while- I mean, I'm assuming I can stay while, right? Uh, and this is what I do when I stay with a buddy, first thing I ask, where's the burn ointment, you know, never know when some major burn could occur, always a good time for safetyâ€¦" I wasn't listening to his words, just his voice, rambling and quick yet calming, the idle chatter that was so fast zooming past my nose it distracted me from my own thoughts, made them seem slow and meandering and unimportant in the fast-paced heat of the words that came spilling from his mouth, so easily said, so easily wasted.

Even before I lost my voice, I wasn't much of a talker. Nobody to talk to. I didn't mince words. That was before the Long Sleep. And suddenly I woke. And I wanted to talk, to answer him, and so many words came to my lips, but were stopped as tiny little electrical signals in my brain, before they reached my vocal chords, and anyway it was too late, we were rocketing through the chain-link of metal girders and old, abandoned cells, and I couldn't reach him, up there behind his panel.

Nobody made me want to talk more than him. Nobody had ever talked to me. Nobody had made me long to say apple. Just a word, right? A round, red fruit. You made juice out of it. Only a word, a few

electrical signals in my brain forming a pattern. It called to mind autumn and the firework show the trees put on every evening with their red and gold and purple leaves.

Of course, I had never seen a tree or a firework or eaten an apple before Aperture. But I knew what they were. Tiny little patterns. Little snaps and crackles of energy, arranged into a sort of binary code so I could process the world around me.

I wanted to say it. If I could just say one word. _Apple. _I could feel it pushing up through my throat, whistling past by broken voice box, coming out as a whimper. If I could just say that one word. The first time I had failed him, the only time I had, really. I did everything he asked. Even when he was horrible and corrupted and cruel, I did what he wanted. I didn't fail him. Except once. I couldn't do it and I bet I could if I just tried, pushed myself harder, ran faster, completed tests, tried not to fall on the gels, tried hard, _so hard _to get back up to him, everything could be okay.

It wasn't. I couldn't say it.

And the first failure hit me like garbage sailing at a couple hundred miles an hour. The first time was the worst. Eventually you get used to disappointing people, and they get used to you disappointing them.

People grew numb after a while. At least I knew I did.

You'd think I'd stop trying to please after everything. But nope. Model test subject, through and through.

_Apple. Apple. Come on, Chell. Say it. Apple. How hard can it be? Appleappleapple. APPLEAPPLEAPPLEAPPLEAPPLEAPP LE-__

The knife slipped from chopping the fruit in half and hit my thumb.

It sliced into the flesh. Not very deep, but right on a vein. Blood spilled at an alarming rate off my finger, and I gasped and sucked in cold air. A few drops of the ugly red liquid spilled like tears from the cut and drip-dripped to the floor.

It hurt.

_Owowowowowowowwww-__

My mind rambled on, screaming at me. Another gasp, and I closed my palm around the thumb, trying to keep the blood in my body, but it kept coming. I stared at it, watching the crimson spill from me. It was almost transfixing, the pain, it lulled me down, down into tunnels with only a portal gun and some long fall bootsâ€¦

"Bloody hell!" And big, warm hands pulled me back up from There, scooping me up and depositing me on the cot. He snatched the first aid kit from under the sink, fingers fumbling for the catch. I watched him through blurred eyes as he tossed everything onto the floor, looking for the bandages. Finding them, he lunged forward like his life depended on it, the panic in his eyes worrying me, and he grabbed the tape and approached me, spritzing the wound with

antibiotic.

I gasped and drew a measured breath in through my teeth. It was a slow, dull pain, like the bruises caused by rubber bullets pelted at you from tiny machine guns, and I could almost ignore it for a moment before it bludgeoned me again with full force.

Fingers clumsy with urgency, he wrapped the tin strip of linen around the digit, and I watch in rapture as the scarlet soaked it within seconds. He wasn't quite so happy to watch it soak the bandage, though, and he cursed under his breath and wrapped another few loops around it. Taping it securely, he sighed and grabbed the hand, sitting down next to me on the cot, panting like he just ran a marathon.

"Jesus, Lady! Why didn't you do anything? You looked so odd, just sitting there, staring at it. If I hadn't-" He swallowed.

"Don't do that again. Please." He wasn't looking at me. Those unnaturally blue eyes were focused on the drops of my blood on the floorboards. His hand was still clasped tight around mine, showing no sign of letting go.

After a minute of silence in which the bones in my hand threatened to be crushed, I stood up. I walked back over to the counter and continued to make dinner. He hovered over my shoulder like an anxious mother bird, fluffing its feathers in worry, brow constricting, and his mouth was open, emitting a stream of white noise.

Nervous talking. It was a habit for him.

"You nearly got hurt pretty bad there. Lucky I was here, right? Told you I'd be useful!" He chirped. In spite of itself, my face spread into a smile.

"Wheatley, expert hacker and bandager of wounds." A tiny giggle.

"After that fiasco, I doubt I could trust you." My heart stopped. He continued, not noticing my deer-in-headlights expression.

"I mean, watching you cook can't be that hard. I've watched people sleep before. It was my job for forever, and let me tell you, this is a lot less boring." I felt the tense muscles in my shoulders loosen.

He rested his chin on my shoulder, staring at the apple I had cut into neat slices, the part that was stained with my blood sitting neatly in the trashcan. His throat vibrated as more words came tumbling forth.

His head was heavy resting on my shoulder, and anyway he was too close. Much too close. I could hear his heartbeat in his neck, thundering through his veins. It was too close. Closer than I had dared to be, even to myself.

But I didn't dare move. I could feel his smile, even though I couldn't see it. I tried to reason with myself. He had no concept of personal space. In his world, he was used to people touching him, picking him up to talk to him, always holding him. And now that he

was the bigger one, it was just natural he kept contact when talking to somebody else.

It was only natural. It didn't mean anything. I repeated the words in my head like a mantra, hoping if I said them enough they might become true. That if I bombarded my senses with them, I might bend the rules of the universe and make them real.

I didn't want them to be true. I wanted him near me because I was stupid and selfish and craved something other than the cold metal I'd had all my life.

So I tried to ignore his pulse and just him in general, and began peeling potatoes.

I tried to keep my hands busy with mundane kitchen tasks, but I couldn't shake his eyes, watching my hands' movement, and I could feel his fingers flex at his sides, wondering why they couldn't do the same.

“It'll come with time, “I wanted to say.

Everyone learned he movement ropes eventually. He was just learning later, that was all.

That was all.

I smiled and tried to believe it, for his sake.

4. Die, My Darling

A week later, I took him to the outpost with me.

I had to get supplies. The clothes I had were fine for fall, but I would need some sort of coat if the winter here was as bad as everyone said it was. I was almost out of shotgun ammo, and the first signs of winter were bearing down on me.

On us.

He was here now, too. The realization made something inside me feel warm. I felt my face stretch into another grin.

It was a long hike. Maybe ten hours. I had made the pilgrimage to Houghton only when needed to, but this time I had to stockpile. There was no way I was walking ten hours to Houghton in the snow.

I woke that morning to his face looming over mine. His eyes were so close, so blue; I woke up and thought I was seeing the sky. Seeing my eyes open, he pulled back and grinned, chirping:

"Are you ready, love? Early bird gets the worm, and all that prattle. Come on, gogogogogogo!" I tried not to hit him. Instead, I peered out the window. The sky was barely lit with the orange light of dawn, a few stars were left twinkling over the hills like dying embers, washing the world in a blood-tinted glow.

I groaned and rolled over onto my side.

"h-hey! C'mon, Lady! Get up!" He shook my shoulder.

"Look, I packed the packs and everything, all you have to do is _bloody get up_â€|" he sighed heavily. The mattress dipped as he sat next to me. I pulled the covers over my head.

One of his hands stroked my head over the duvet, and he sighed again as he slid down next to me.

"I guess I'll justâ€| wait." He muttered. His hand continued to idly stroke my head, and I almost purred, feeling the soothing motion lull me back to sleep.

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I woke up for good about two hours later, to find him still awake, twiddling his thumbs and whistling quietly. I propped myself up, sighing heavily.

"Hey, you're awake! Brilliant!" I stood up, pushing past him. I didn't like the way that echoed. He had said something like it, before.

_Hey, you're alive! Brilliant! _The exact same tone. The only difference was the one word. They were two different things.

I don't really think he understood the concept of death. Robots didn't die. They could be shut off, lose battery, even be destroyed. But their consciousness was always meticulously preserved, in a line of ones and zeroes on some sort of backup, if not permanently carved into their system.

I didn't know what happened when you died. Just thinking about it made a chill snake down my spine, trigger goosebumps on my arms.

I refused to die out here. From anything. A head crab. A fall. Drowning.

I had nothing to lose back There. I was already a dead woman if I didn't keep stepping, keep solving, keep going.

I had gone to Hell and back, beat it to a bloody and unrecognizable pulp, and emerged victorious.

Now if only I could do that with my fears.

But fears followed you everywhere, just on your heels, no matter how long you kept stepping, solving or going. I could see where I was headed, like a deer stuck in headlights, so afraid of the future I knew was coming I could do nothing to stop it. I was going to run myself ragged trying to escape my fears, and eventually collapse in a bloody heap in thirty or forty years, too tired to run any longer.

And this time nobody was there, forcing me to get up and keep testing.

I would die swallowed by fear and regret.

I could feel myself shaking. Shaking with that horrible, ugly, icy fear that crept over my limbs like a sickness, contaminating everything around me with a blackness at the edge of my vision and a horrible sick feeling bubbling up in my throat, searing my esophagus with its ugly taint. And I could feel the sickness curling itself around my voice box, simultaneously making me want to scream for help and forbidding me from doing it.

So I ran faster.

I was a pro. I had been running my whole life. Just keep stepping, Chell. One more test, one more day, one more week, until time blended together into a mangled mess full of adrenal vapor and that cold, mechanical voice that cut like knives.

But there was another one. Another voice in the jumbled and twisted mess that was my head.

A chirpy voice with an odd accent that beseeched me to keep going, talked to me like I wasn't another subject, gasped and awed at my testing skills, which I had taken for granted, knowing they couldn't help me now. The voice was sunny, it supported me with the abundant words, the odd vocabulary, and my feet felt lighter and I could run a little while longer.

His soft, warm voice was like a drug, I could feel it surging in my bloodstream, and now that he was finally here it was that much more potent. This drug didn't have side effects. It was just happiness and cake and sunshine.

And for a second, when I closed my eyes, I could feel the sunshine on my skin and in my hair, feel it filling me up to the brim with life.

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Nothing preceded the attack. They were simply there, filling the space that was once occupied by just an empty patch of air.

And then they surged in, surrounding me on all sides. I didn't know how to explain them. Impossible biology, wreathed with rings of pale blue on an ugly gray, hot feet scraping the ground, and I could hear the earth crying out in pain, a horrible skittering noise, and they were all around.

"What the bloody Hell are those?" Wheatley screamed, his hands twitching, half-heartedly going up to his sides, almost as if to ward them off. The nearest one stared down the barrel of my shotgun.

A low growl tore its way out of my sandpaper-rough throat. They watched me; various antenna twitching, and I wasted no time loosing a bullet into the eye of the nearest one. Using my open hand to signal, I grabbed his shoulder and pointed to the ground. His knees buckled, and he sat on the ground with his arms around his head, shaking in fear.

I swung the gun around, prepared for the kickback, and shot again.

It was nothing like wielding a portal gun. The thing kicked in my hand like a stubborn mule, no doubt bruising me, but I gripped it harder and prepped my finger on the trigger again, reloading quickly before standing back up and pointing it at one of the two left. The smell of gunpowder filled the air, and while I used to hate it, it was also accompanied by the smell of singed flesh. One of the _things_ reared back, screaming a howl that just _shouldn't be_, and I had to cover my ears. The gun slipped from my hand, and I doubled over. Blind for a moment, I fumbled around in the dirt for the shotgun. One of the things brought a claw down, narrowly missing my hand. I blinked to clear the black spots in my vision, spun around, picked it up, and pulled the trigger.

There was no satisfying kick, no harsh whiff of gunpowder, and no noise. Just a tiny, metallic click. I pressed it again. And again and again and again and they were closing in on us and I _was out of goddamn ammunition_. There was more in my backpack. I ripped the buckles off, trying to unzip it in time. One of the monsters stepped close to me, so close I could smell the unnatural tinge of ozone it emitted, and clamped a claw around my shoulder, dragging me back, away from my bag and my ammo. Pain lanced through my entire arm, and as a reflex, I tensed, fingers twitching. The shotgun fell out of my grip.

I was being dragged backwards and Wheatley was watching through his fingers in horror, tears streaming down his face and I opened my mouth, trying _so, so hard_ _to scream but I couldn't, only a pained whimper slipped through my lips.

I twitched and struggled, feeling the claws rake through my shoulder but I didn't really care, just trying to get away, away from it, and I could feel tears pressing against my eyelids but they just wouldn't fall.

"Stop! Nononono!" He scrambled up, face frozen in a tableau of horror, hand gripping and reaching and clutching for me, but only managing to capture empty air. He tripped forwards, bashing his chin on the ground and clutching my ankle. His fingers wrapped around my boot and pulled. It wrenched me towards him, but no further out of its grip. And I could see the panic in his eyes, and he got up, fingers clumsily flexing. He launched himself forwards, kicking and punching and hitting the _thing_, and it shouldn't have done anything, but his fists fervently pounded its armored head, slamming on its eyeholes, and its grip loosened further. Ripping away, I rolled over my injured shoulder and snatched up the shotgun, furiously reloading it, and filled its head full of bullets.

Without a break for a breath, I turned around, another round primed, only to hear a scratching as the last one receded into the forest, not nearly as quietly as it had appeared.

I stared at my shoulder, oozing blood from a three dark purple cuts. My coat was completely ripped open, exposing a hot, wet, stinging wound to the air.

He sat there, staring at his hands. They were covered in puffy, fresh red cuts. I eased the coat off, grabbing the first aid kit from the pack and wrapping a strip of linen around my shoulder. He didn't even turn around. He didn't even look at me.

"I'm sorry." Came the whisper, so quiet I almost didn't hear it. Oh my hands and knees, I crawled over to him, turned him towards me with a hand on his shoulder. I looked into his face.

Tears poured freely from his eyes. He took one look at my shoulder and his entire body convulsed, and he coughed, a dry hacking noise, followed on its tail end by a heavy sob.

"I'm so sorry!" I stared at him, confusion surely showing plain as day on my features.

Why?

"I didn't mean to do it! I was just so _scared_! I didn't want to die! I _can't _die!" His words were incoherent, smashed to bits by his tears and his cough.

I shook my head in pure, utter bewilderment.

"I can't die because Android Hell is a real place and if I die, that's where I'm headed! Whoop! No more Wheatley! I won't be around to try and make it right anymore, I'll be gone, I'll be gone, and I'll go _back there!_ To that horrible, awful place, because Android Hell is a real place and that's it! Aperture Science! The worst place on this goddamn blue sphere that's hurtling through space that can possibly exist!"

"I have to make it right so I don't have to go back there, ever, and when I die, I can die like a human, I can die with _you_, that's all I want!" His voice petered off into a pitiful squeak. The tears had stopped flowing, and for all his height and the bruise forming above his left eye, his shattered glasses, the unbrushed hair, he was still a baby. His fingers had burrowed themselves into the dirt while he was talking, and he started to rip out clumps of grass.

I lifted a hand to brush the hair out of his eyes. My fingers were trembling and bloody, but he didn't seem to mind, leaning his head into my hand, hands stopping their busy work on the grass, instead splaying outwards, twitching slightly.

"When I die, I want it to be with you."

5. Youth Without Youth

The air was crisp and sweet, even sweeter than back at the shack that I barely managed to call home.

The outpost was set up in a large warehouse, an abandoned factory space with soaring ceilings that almost gestured at palatial- if they weren't made of cracked, dirty, rotten wood, showing tiny little slits of sunlight, and letting through the rain and all the elements.

It was one of the better-off buildings in the ruins of what was once a sweet rural town, the rest just being bricks and splintered planks at worst, half-assembled walls with tarps pulled tight for ceilings at best. We passed a few of these on our way in, Wheatley gaped like a fish, round eyes open wide, so he could best take in the world.

Everything about him was open and accepting, and he lived life to the fullest, on whim and hope, his wide eyes open and his hands trustfully at his sides, knowing that on a whole, the world was a good place.

And most of the time when he blindly fell into the arms of someone who wouldn't catch him, he wasn't discouraged. He laughed, dusted himself off, made a crack about his clumsiness, praised them for at least trying to catch him, and sauntered off, none the wiser.

It made me angry. So angry. How could he be so blunderingly, blindly trusting of everyone when he had seen people betray him over and over, toss him off to the side like garbage? It was painful to watch him wake up in the morning, ready to trust and love and see, only to be let down, a little bit more hope slipping between his fingers like sand down an hourglass.

It was painful to see him being changed by the real world, not his Aperture fantasy, where only She was a real threat, to out here, where he was slowly twisted and hunched and crippled.

He was going to become like me.

While being outside empowered me, it crippled him. He was used to a place with rules and order and mechanical cogs and gears, moving round and round, and if they stopped, it was only a catch, a glitch, easily put back together.

The real world didn't work like that and it was killing him inside.

He was my happiness, my light, my drug. I would protect him from whatever happened. For completely selfish reasons, but was a reason ever unselfish?

I was horribly, imperfectly human.

And for a split second, I wished I were a robot. A robot did what it was programmed to do. A robot did it because that was its purpose. A human did it because something was in it for them. I wanted to be helping him protecting him for any reason other than I was foolishly dependent on him.

I was a broken, chipped, human china figure and I was staring at all the pretty little porcelain dolls without a crack in them, vacant smiles on their faces, cheeks rosy and even and perfect.

I wanted to smash their faces until they bled porcelain shards and they became just like me.

And so went the cycle of human jealousy. It started out with one, who dragged another and another down with them, until there was nobody on top, everyone was a chipped doll.

And then some higher power (or a mad AI) smashed everything to pieces.

Again.

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A warm hand closed over mine, yanking me up. My eyes widened, and for a second, I was sure I looked like him, a wide, awestruck expression. For once, he wasn't talking. We were about a mile from the central hub (if you could call it that) of Houghton. He smiled down at me, lacing his fingers through mine and swinging our arms.

He looked like an idiot, walking down the street in an orange prison-esque jumpsuit with a huge slit in it, and a pair of giant white scuffed sneakers. And then there was me, tiny in comparison, with a bloody, ripped jacket and a serious expression, looking to the whole world like we were some sort of _couple_, and while that made my heart sing a bit, I squashed the noise before somebody heard.

I felt like a girl, giggling at the ninth grade dance, abnormally prettied up so that one boy would notice her, casting sidelong glances, blushing every time he looked her way.

The ninth grader inside me never got to go to a dance, meet a boy. The ninth grader inside me had gotten turrets instead of a date. Walked through Emancipation Grills instead of the doors to a bid old doodied-up gym. I got cruel robotic taunts instead of loud music.

I never had the chance to be a ninth grader.

That was all it was.

I wanted to be young and stupid, dancing like an idiot and forgetting all her problems. I wanted that special boy to smile my way, feel my knees weaken.

Now that I was safe, my attentions were just focusing themselves on the nearest boy to replicate that, seven years later than it should've happened.

We were friends. Acquaintances being a better word. So many bad things had been done, but his apologies and my stupid willingness to believe them made everything balance out into a sort of equilibrium.

I had a stupid, embarrassing freshman crush on the man who had tried to kill me, and I tried to think of his horrible corrupted voice as he gave my hand a squeeze, words shooting out of his mouth again. But all I could hear was sweet talk, pet names being called, slipping like cotton candy from his lips, soft and sweet and light as clouds.

"You all right? You're awfully quiet. Not that you aren't-you know-quiet usually- a-and there's nothing wrong with that, but I thought you seemed quieter than usual, which I'm not sure how I got to that conclusion, since it's hard to be quieter than not talking- how would that work? Negative talking? Do I talk so much you can actually say negative words?" I smiled. And everything evaporated. Just grinned, and he smiled back, giving my hand another friendly squeeze.

My brain shied at the word _friendly._

I was saved from my embarrassment by a dimpled, red-haired woman

catching sight of me and sprinting down the street in her scuffed sneakers, tucking her golden-highlighted curls back into her bandanna, wiping a smudge of oil off her cheek.

"Chell!" She yelled exuberantly, voice carrying and reverberating off everything, and another woman poked her head out from under her tarp, waved at me and ducked back under.

I stopped in the middle of the intersection, raised my free hand to wave to her, and she waved back excitedly, never stopping her sprint, finally crashing full-bodied into me, and I sprawled backwards, letting go of his hand, and he spun, hands wrapping themselves around his head in protection, brows furrowed confusedly.

Rona pressed an exuberant kiss to each of my cheeks, hands firmly clamped on my shoulders, refusing to let go. I sat through it, squirming under her touch, uncomfortable by the weak and tiny feeling I got, like I was clamped in a vice, and she was a scientist, examining my every movement, watching the way I reacted, and if I did a thing wrong for even a second, a mark on my file, a red slash showing my failure there for everyone else to see and laugh at.

Of course, Rona wasn't doing that. She was the closest thing I had to a friend. Before he crash-landed into my life, of course.

"Who's this?" She asked, craning her neck up to see his face. He waved.

'Wheatley! I'm staying with- ah- Chell." He stuck his hand out to shake. She didn't take it. My name sounded weird on his lips. His accent mangled the word, changing it and shaping it. I almost liked it better this way.

"Chell." He muttered under his breath, looking at me with an expression I couldn't place.

To her credit, Rona didn't even blink. Her smile was all business, impersonal and didn't reach her eyes, but when it turned back to me, it blazed bright again. It was so searingly bright and happy it sizzled against my retinas and infected me with its sunshine by force, and I could feel the sun come out from behind the clouds again.

"Just in town to trade? It's going to be dark soon. You'll never make it back to your cabin in the bloody night. There's a vacant building beside Anne's, maybe you'd like to camp out there for tonight?" The asking was an empty request. She asked me every time, hoping my answer wasn't any different, knowing I'd camp two doors down from her house and we'd stay up late, playing cards while she moaned about her husband and I jotted down short answers on a yellow notepad, occasionally just doodling a smiley face or an x to express my emotion.

I'd broken tradition. I had brought someone else with me, and I could see something in her eyes as they flicked inconspicuously between him and me. I knew her well. She was torn between being happy for me and angry that I had broken a tradition that I'd kept like clockwork for six months.

She was the queen of grin and bear it. Nobody was her equal. She was

stubborn as hell and good at what she did. It was the reason we were friends.

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The old, ramshackle house wasn't as warm as the cabin, but it represented the upper percentage of housing in Houghton, with four walls and most of a roof.

Little by little this town was recreating itself, establishing a foothold and another and then a handhold, slowly creeping up, so slow you might not notice it, but by now it was no longer dangling by its fingertips off the cliff edge, it had both elbows and its stomach up, and only its legs dangled down. It could still be reduced to clinging for dear life, but for now it was safer and almost steady, for once.

Everyone there was battle-worn and tired. It showed in their eyes, even those of the children, the children that didn't play anymore, instead went out to the hunting range to shoot their daddy's rifle, instead of Barbies for their birthdays, they got new shoes, a new coat, maybe a hair ribbon or a little dinosaur. More often, children were coming of age now, they were awarded their first handgun, first machete, and they enjoyed it. Those adults in children's bodies grinned and thanked their mother for the pistol, laughing like it was the best present ever.

Because it was, to them.

They had forgotten about Barbies and toy trucks and playing in the sand and everything that had made them kids.

They would grow up like me, without a ninth-grade dance.

They would grow up to be hard, saddened adults who learned the best way to face your fears is to shoot it full of bullets.

Such were the lengths we went to to stay alive.

6. Like A Crutch

Rona was two doors down, playing cards with another friend, and I was huddled on the double bed, covers over my head, feeling the warmth and safety of the enclosed space washing over me in waves.

The distance wasn't much, but it wasn't just physical. A wall had been slapped up between us, a cheery, blue-eyed, British wall named Wheatley.

She didn't want me anymore.

What, I got one other friend and she was suddenly off, playing cards with Alice or whoever? I tried to gulp back the rejection, covering it up with a million lies.

If apologies were band-aids, lies were makeup. They healed nothing, maybe only irritated the wound. But they slathered a thick layer over everything, and sometimes, were totally transparent.

I slapped makeup on the rejection, painting it skin color with a big brush, each bristle an individual conviction, me telling myself this or that, but I could still see the scars under that concealer.

And they still hurt, just as much.

I wasn't good enough.

You would've thought I'd be used to it by now.

The only person who wasn't pushing me away forcibly was the one causing the divide.

And I could see those walls, boxing me in, crushing me to pieces, and his voice, yelling triumphantly:

"I've got you now! Trapped." He had actually said that. And now it was the same. The very same and I cursed myself for not seeing it before. My mind was on replay, his voice running on a reel in my head, sped up too fast, watching him try to kill me over and over, him almost not coming to my rescue when the monster had its claws embedded in me, simultaneously trying to drop me like everyone else and holding me close.

Like a crutch.

That was all I was. A crutch. I was still a moving, button-pushing machine with no real feelings, just a crutch he could use to get around and discard whenever it suited him.

He wouldn't change.

Nobody ever changed.

This drug wasn't sunshine and cake and happiness. At least not for long. I came crashing down from my sugar high, dropping from the beautiful blue stratosphere, blue like-
nodon'tgothereyou'llgethurt- falling and falling and falling, but this wasn't weightless, I could feel my guilt and all my bad deeds weighing me down like a stone, and I smashed through the old, boarded-up entrance to Hell, my nerves singing with the pain that I deserved. My own personal Tartarus, punishment for being horrible, monstrous. I fell down, down, down the rabbit hole, but Wonderland wasn't where I found myself.

I was perched on a plate, high above a bottomless pit, facing a huge monitor. But this time it wasn't a sphere with a single blue optic that stood before me, but a man, blond hair the color of sand, shattered glasses, wearing the blue hoodie I had traded his jumpsuit for, and he was grinning at me.

It wasn't a happy grin.

He had caught me, cornered me.

This moron had outsmarted me.

And I had no portal gun, no means of escape. The plates smashed together, puncturing so many holes in my body, and it hurt, but what

hurt more is that I saw it coming and he had it planned from the beginning.

It hadn't mattered too much, Back There, that I was a crutch. I didn't care. I was using him too. We were using each other as a means of escape. Just two strangers thrown together, and together we almost did it.

This time it was more complicated.

I had feelings for that stupid metal ball, but was using him just the same to keep myself from shattering like the broken figurine I was.

That wasn't love.

That wasn't romantic in the slightest.

That was two people clinging to each other in a shipwreck, trying to push the other under the water in hopes they might use the others' drowned corpse to propel themselves onto land.

I was tricking myself into thinking there was something.

A 'friendship' of convenience, that was all.

The realization made me feel hollow.

I couldn't cry.

I didn't want to scream.

I just watched my body be smashed to tiny pieces by the crusher plates, listened to his laugh.

I was hollow.

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In a few minutes, he came into the bedroom, pulling the hood up to warm his ears. In his other hand he balanced a tray with two mugs, steaming in the chill air. The smell of chamomile wafted over to my noise. Sitting down next to me, he handed me one of them.

Our hands didn't touch.

But he gave a grin my way.

"I thought you looked under the weather, thought you might like a bit of tea. That's what people do, right?" I nodded, blowing on the surface to cool it.

"I went over to that nice lady Rora's house, and I told her you weren't feeling well, and she just sort of gave me weird look and left. But then I went over past her house to that lady with the blue tarp, and asked what I should do, and she said- her name is Marie, by the way, nice name- she said I should give you some tea. I found this funny thing with a flat top and a little metal circle under it, she

said I could have it, that it was her old camping stove, and I wondered- how in the world is that a stove? I mean seriously, it was a teeny thing. Nothing like any stove I've ever seen. Anyway, I found an old kettle and I made chamomile tea- Ann next door gave it to me. She says to feel better and that I should give you this tea and a big hug, okay?" He set his mug down and wrapped an arm around me, pulling me in. I buried my face in his chest and breathed out heavily, and he prattled above me about tea and stoves and how he nearly burnt his hand again and how that would've been bloody terrible, and all those other things and I hated the sound of his voice.

It was there in my head, too, the same voice with an ugly edge I swore I could hear underneath his cheery façade. I was dying over and over again, my own blood spilling from my eyes, him watching me hungrily, smiling a mockery of the one on his face now, laughing. Laughing at the poor orphan girl who had been dealt one too many a bad card.

I yanked back so fast it sloshed most of my tea onto my lap.

"Chell?" He asked, waving a hand in front of my eyes. Down There, he didn't call me by my name. He didn't care enough to use it.

Hearing my name hurt.

You didn't name your crutches.

And he smiled, a reflex for him, but my heart still fluttered, trying to take off. I repeated all the nasty words that were singing through my head, but they were offset by the fact that he had gone around, looking for a way to make me feel better.

If your crutch fell apart, you fixed it.

I looked up at him, analyzing his face like a puzzle.

Aperture hadn't prepared me for real life puzzles, just ones involving the portal gun and turrets and light bridges and _their inventions_. I wasn't ever meant to escape and learn world skills.

They trained me with Aperture tech, to make sure I was stunted in every other region. That I sometimes wished for the portal gun, because it was the device with which all my problems had been solved before.

These puzzles that I prided myself on meant absolutely nothing out here.

His face was just another puzzle I couldn't solve.

But I didn't have to. I could walk away from this one. I wasn't locked in a room. Whether I progressed wasn't dictated by me solving this puzzle.

I could just up and leave.

I could.

I couldn't.

Just the thought made me feel sick and ugly and hollow.

I cared too much to leave, hated him too much to stay.

And those spiked plates were closing in, trapping me.

I set my tea down. I tried to focus on the other things. The remains of the sun, making its getaway over the hills, leaving behind a trail of fire that set the sky alight. His grin widened and he leaned in a bit. I ignored him and focused instead of the motes of dust floating around the room, shining golden in the light. He was propped up on one hand, that grin was close to my face, and I melted like a wax figure in the sun. I turned, and he was right there. Our noses clumsily bumped together.

I tried to remind myself of what I was so convicted of just a few minutes ago, but he looked at me and his face was close, I could see the navy blue circle around the edge of his iris and the sun-bleached eyelashes. A few freckles dotted his nose. All this I observed from such a close vantage point, and yet he slid closer still.

My lips parted and my breathing hitched. I could do it. I could fulfill my stupid ninth-grader crush and get it out of my system. I didn't want to. Hadn't I just made a whole speech about bloated corpses and drowning and crutches and how this wasn't real love?

Then what did love feel like?

This was too real already. I felt dizzy and woozy; the world was pitching around me. I knew what I felt was as real as anything was going to get, in a world where kids wielded guns and robots became human and that wasn't even questioned.

We must've sat there for an eternity, nobody daring to even _breathe_.

Gently, softly, he leaned forwards just a little bit, and one of his hands slid up underneath my chin, and our lips touched. Instinctively, I moved, a little jump of surprise, not expecting the little electric tingle that ran up from my toes to my head. After a few seconds, I kissed back.

The world stopped pitching around me, settled back into a smooth orbit. It was the last piece of a puzzle, a simple thing I hadn't seen before, like finally solving a test and getting a rush of endorphins, for finally doing it, getting it done, one thing checked off the list.

Endorphins faded fast. This went on and on, and I was numb to everything else, just the kiss that I never wanted to end.

I was a ninth grader, kissing that boy, blushing with embarrassment.

A first kiss well spent.

I was getting my prom date, seven years later. He wasn't wearing a

tuxedo but a faded blue sweater. I wasn't wearing makeup and my hair probably looked like a mess but I didn't need anything else.

I slid a hand to his shoulder, wanting to get as close as possible. Using my other hand, I pulled the hood off him, my fingers sliding into his hair. His hands slid from my chin to my waist, pulling me up tight against his chest.

I felt as if my head was going to pop like a thin, oily bubble, my chest was light, like a balloon. It felt like somebody had pumped my body full of helium, and now the only way to go was up. Up, up, up into the sky, and I was never coming down.

I didn't pause to consider my situation like I might have done a week ago.

My feelings weren't stupid and odd and unexplainable. He felt something back and that was all I could ask for.

Only a few seconds later, I could hear the deep, roiling chime of the city hall's bell in the distance. I froze, sliding away, putting my ear to the window and listening.

I counted three chimes.

_Bong, _

_Bong, _

_Bong, _

There was a short pause here. Three rings meant for everyone to drop what they were doing and meet in the town hall building, an old ramshackle complex smack dab in the center of Houghton.

And suddenly, almost tentatively, another.

Bong.

I had never heard four rings before. But I knew what they meant. I was an honorary member of this town, whether I liked it or not and I didn't want to believe it, but I had heard it with my own ears.

Four rings.

Evacuation.

7. The Iron Is Hot

Everything I owned fit into the backpack.

Wheatley had his own, and he carried his things, which included a shard of glass he had picked up in the middle of the woods, declaring it 'neat', an old, battered water bottle, the camping stove, a few bottles of kerosene, and a few acorns.

Into my bag went my clothes, anything that wouldn't spoil, and my old Long Fall boots.

I don't know why I kept them.

Every time I packed this backpack, I meant to leave them. Meant to walk away, never looking back, with my back turned to them, ready to leave them to slowly fall to dust.

Every time I shoved them into the pack, even though they were oddly shaped, took up too much space, and made an annoying springing noise whenever I ran.

They were the only things I had left from when times were much simpler. When the press of a button fixed everything.

I remembered they rotted away in the corner of my room for a while, taunting me, looking still as glossy and white as the day I got them.

One day, I took them out. Just to try them on, I promised myself. And I wondered how I could've stood having them on for so long, they pinched my toes into an uncomfortable arched position, and the way I walked was confusing and odd, like I was too tall. I limped around in them, wondering why I even tried them on.

Before I even knew it, I was standing at the top of the cliff, the boots pinching my feet, staring down at the ground, at least a hundred feet below. It was a fall I would have scoffed at, Back There.

I wanted to know if I could still do it.

If the magic in the boots still worked out here.

I wanted to know if I had dreamed everything.

I don't think my mind could have dreamed up a worse Hell.

I smiled, stretched out my arms, feeling the wind nip at my skin. My hair was undone, and it floated around my face, the sharp ends stinging my cheeks.

I extended my fingers, on my tiptoes, balancing a moment, and all my doubts and insecurities bubbled to the surface, popping in my face and emitting the rank odor of fear.

I was better than that.

I was going to fly, high above the ground, and the boots would catch me. They could withstand the force from a fall up to three miles. This wasn't even one.

I could do it.

So, I shook my head, tossing fear back into my mind, tensed my legs, and jumped.

And in that moment, I froze, completely weightless. Free.

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The town hall was crammed. Everyone bustled around, packing their

supplies. Children hooked on their ammo belts. Mothers with babies strapped to their backs toted machetes.

Everyone was primed for battle.

I didn't have a knife, or an ammo belt. All I had was an old shotgun and barely any shells. Wheatley was completely unarmed. And I still didn't know why we were preparing for evacuation. Evening had fallen like a lilac blanket, with a few little moth-holes from which starlight shone through. The sky showed no signs of trouble. But when I looked at the hills in the dying light, a cluster of black shapes huddled on the horizon, twitching like a mass being, hovering ominously, worse than dark clouds.

Ann pushed through the crowd, past a disgruntled man who was reloading his gun, leading her six-year-old daughter by the hand. She smiled at me. One of her hands moved in a few quick motions, motioning out in sign language.

I waved to her in a quick, circular fashion.

_Hello. _I turned to little Harriet, waving at her, too. Her little hand moved quickly and surely, spelling out a pattern, smiling at me all the while.

Hello, Chell. I grinned and she grinned back. Harriet was deaf. Since birth.

All the toxins in our bloodstream from the battle with the Combine had hidden out in our fatty cells, and we weren't affected, but the next generation, ones like little Harriet, had been born with defects. Harriet was one of the better ones. Another little boy was born without half of his left arm. Another without an eye. Perfectly healthy little children, but the birth defect rate had been upped.

Honestly, I think your hearing wasn't the worst sense to lose.

Without hearing, as long as you could see their mouth, you could read their lips and know what they were saying. Hearing was a limited sense. If you were deaf, you were freed from the limits that your range of hearing put on you.

Still, to live a whole life not knowing what her mother's voice sounded like?

Was I any better?

The closest thing I had to a mother was a murderous AI.

She turned to her mother, back to me, tugging one of her hands on the belt at her hips. Her brow furrowed in confusion, little hands moving fervently to let the words out.

_Where's hers? _She pointed at me. Her mother's hands twitched at her sides, but she didn't look at me. I didn't think she knew what to say.

After a few second, my hands, almost of their own accord, motioned

out:

_I don't have one. I've got a gun, though. _I showed her my shotgun. She looked at the battered exterior skeptically. Her face set itself in consternation. She turned back to her mother, fingers signaling.

_Give Chell one. _Ann's tired, harassed face lit up with amusement. Out loud, she mused,

"I might have one in the back. Watch Harriet for me." She slipped between two men and was gone.

Harriet nodded. Her fingers finally still, she sat down on the dusty wooden floor and began to sweep the dirt into a little pile with her hand.

Wheatley sat down next to her without a word. She looked up, surprised. Her fingers flickered, stuttering slightly, and she peered at me questioningly.

"Uh, what is she saying?" He asked, staring at her fingers like if he looked long enough they would suddenly turn into something he could understand.

Be nice to him, I signed to her. She smirked.

"Wh-what was that? Are you talking about me?" His eyes darted around, between both of us. We giggled like little girls, and at the same time, made the same motion:

Maybe.

"Hey! What did you say? I have a right to know!" He tried to sound serious and imposing, but he couldn't control his laugh. Harriet laughed too, her serious face spreading into a gap-toothed grin. She shook her head wildly, her black braids flopping around her head. To the end of each a tattered bobble clung determinedly.

Ann came back, toting a leather belt over her shoulder, tucking a few stray wisps of hair from her black bob behind her ear. She smiled and handed the belt to me.

"Here you are, dear." I nodded, taking it from her. It was all leather, with an ammunition clip and holster built into it. It was almost a harness, with two leather straps that went under my backpack, with a sheath for a machete located between my shoulderblades.

Thanks.

"Don't thank me, thank Harriet." I leaned down and said:

_Thanks, Harriet. _The little girl grinned and waved another circular motion as her mother lifted her up and led her away.

Goodbye.

I settled the cool leather around my hips, fastening the buckles up tight and pulling it to fit. The ammo pouch was crammed full of

shotgun shells.

My fingers danced of their own accord.

Thanks, Harriet.

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The entire hall fell silent. The small, harried-looking man at the podium rang a tiny, glassy bell, and all sound died, except for the impatient rustle of people's feet and the sound of Ms. Morris' baby crying. She shushed it, but it continued to sob and wail. The sound grated down my spine, sharp and ugly.

The man's hands slammed down on the podium, and his fingers dug into the wood. His head swiveled clumsily, and his mouth hung slack, a thin string of drool dribbling down his chin. But his voice was clear and loud, just like it always was, and the aging mayor of the town delivered his last speech.

"Friends and family of this town-" His voice gave out a moment, and he hacked and coughed and I could see the capillaries in one of his eyes burst, filling it with red.

"I have so much to say, and so little time to say it. In only a minute my words won't be mine anymore, so listen." His voice was pleading and I tensed, wondering what the hell he meant. My skin crawled with a million ill tidings, and I began to inch towards the exit, but tiny little scratching noises of a million tiny little claws began to work at the timbers on the outside of the barn, I could hear them, they were everywhere, in the walls, in the ceiling, and I tried to scream, to warn someone, but Wheatley was transfixed on the man in the podium and nobody else would look at me except little Harriet.

She ran to my side, pudgy fingers clutching for mine. I slid two shots into my gun, snapping the barrel closed.

I expected it, but his next words hurt just the same.

"It's a trap." His voice gave up, and he threw his hands up, in a shrug, and he simply accepted it with a forlorn twist of his lips, but that wasn't him. Tears stained with blood spilled down his cheeks, and one of his arms clutched at his heart.

His face remained stony.

"Go. They wanted you all in here, and I did it, I rung the bell myself and I'm so sorry, my hands did it and it wasn't me, I swear. But I put in another ring. Get out of here. Go. _Go._" And he coughed again, scritch-scratching at the back of his head, and his hand came away bloody. Nobody moved.

The metallic click of a whole room full of guns being primed struck us all at once. His face twisted into something that wasn't, couldn't be human, his skin bubbling and moving in patterns that weren't created by his muscles.

"_What are all you idiots doing? Run!" _His voice screamed out in the silent room, echoing off the rafters and hitting my ears all at once, echoing and echoing and I had to leave now, get out now.

A hundred guns fired at once.

They all hit their target dead on.

The man's head exploded, popping into nothingness, one second there, the next second only a bloody spatter on the wall behind him.

And then the things that were working at the wall broke through.

A million bug-like things crashed through, antennae waving, eyes focused on the meal they were just about to receive.

Following were the humanoids, tall men, all men, with guns and ugly helmets, eye slits aglow.

Guns fired bolts of ugly yellow fire, slashing right through a whole line of people.

Dead, just like that. I was queasy. Blood splattered onto my boots.

I fired.

Everyone fired. In unison, again. A line of them fell, but there were more and more.

Where were they all coming from?

Everyone talked about the Combine invasion, how humans had beaten them down, veterans crowed about how humans would never give in to aliens.

They depleted most of our ranks, and then sent for the last of their troops. They struck while the iron was hot and it was going to burn us all alive.

I had something to protect. I wouldn't die lying down.

Harriet clung to my pant leg, screaming, a high, unholy wail, out of pitch, ugly in its pain. Just a few feet over, Ann lay in a pool of her own and others blood, face frozen in fear.

Some people might say she died with maternal fire in her eyes, trying to protect her only daughter.

Those people didn't know anything. Judging by the bloody handprints on Harriet's shoulders, Ann had died shoving her daughter in front, tossing her to the monsters.

I fired another bullet into her skull.

We didn't need any more betrayals today.

And the mayors' words came back to me, echoing.

How in the Hell were we going to fight these? There were too many.

They drowned out everything except Harriet clinging to me; even Wheatley was torn away from me in the crowd. I scanned the heads for a familiar shock of blond, but he wasn't there.

He wasn't lying with Ann, either.

He had the right idea. For once, the coward would win this battle.

I yanked the nearest person's shoulder, pointing them to the last exit, on the other side of the hall. They nodded. I pointed to my throat, cupped my hands around my mouth and pointed to the frenzy around me.

The man opened his mouth wide, fired a shot at the ceiling, and screamed:

"_Fall back, you idiots! There's too many!_" People began to rush for the exits, bursting out to the other door into the dark, screaming and sobbing and trailing blood from various wounds.

The town retreated, too fast to lick its wounds, still reeling from the loss of so many mothers and daughters and brothers.

The town was one being.

We were too in shock to even see the world around us. We reeled with the grief of losing so many so fast.

They had bested us. The invasion had begun.

8. Mommy Dearest

I tried to cradle Harriet in my arms, rocking her gently as she sobbed. Her hand clutched my coat collar, fingers snatching and almost ripping the fabric. Her free hand rapidly flicked from letter to letter, spelling out over and over and over, a single word.

Mother.

_Mother. _

Mother.

Mothermothermothermother

Her words started to go faster, slurring and barely distinguishing between letters, turning into one fluid shape.

_Mothermothermothermothermoth ermOTHERMOTHERMOTHERMOTHERMO
THERMOTHER- _

I clamped her fist shut with mine. But her fingers forcibly shoved mine away, continuing to spell and she couldn't stop. Her fingers shook but she still spelled, biting her lip until it bled, tears dripping down her cheeks and staining my shirt. I tried to wrestle them down, and her fist slammed into my cheek.

MOTHERMOTHERMOTHERMOTHERMOTH ERMOTHERMOTHERMOTHER

It was a punch, hard enough to leave hot red mark that stung. Her face was furious, and still she spelled. Her fingers continued, the word shortening.

Mommy. MOTHERMOTHERMOTHERMOMMYMOMMY MOMMYMOMMYWHEREAREYOUCOMEBACKPLEASECOMEBACK

One word. It was all slurred into one word. If you looked up that word in the dictionary, the definition would be pain. Pain and loss and disbelief.

MOMMYBEHERECOMEBACKIWANTYOUBACKINEEDYOUOMOMMYMOMMYMOMMYMOMMYMOMMYMOMMYMOMMYMOMMYILOVEYOUOMMYMOMMYIWANTMYMOMMYi-

She stopped.

Her entire body froze up.

She buried her face in my chest and sobbed. I stroked her hair. It was wet and matted to her head.

I couldn't do anything. I just sat there, feeling impotent, scanning the gathering crowd congregating around the row of homemade moss and grass shelters, mixed in with tarps and tents and whatever anyone could scrounge up.

We were nearly fifty miles away from the ruins that used to be Houghton.

The air was ugly and sullied with the smell of blood.

Every once in a while the hot breeze would blow fire ashes into my hair and eyes.

I blinked them out, ignored the sting, ignored the tears down my cheeks. I scanned the crowd over and over, religiously, staring and staring and searching but he wasn't there.

My stomach roiled. And it wasn't from hunger.

I hadn't seen him since he was swallowed by the crowd.

He was fine, I told myself. He was just helping out somewhere else. You knew Wheatley. Always trying to help.

Out of the initial one hundred-odd members of Houghton Township, about forty were still alive.

Forty men and women and children who had just lost everything they knew.

But humans didn't give up.

Ever.

I could see it in the grim set of their faces, even as tears leaked from their eyes as they buried the people that had died not minutes

ago.

I almost smiled. But then two men walked past me, carrying a body wrapped in a bloody cloth, covering the face.

But a gold-tinted curl slid out, red even under the blood that coated it. My fingers tightened on Harriet's shoulders, and I nodded as the corpse passed me, acknowledging Rona in death.

There was too much death today. I almost curled up in a ball and tried to stay numb.

The only thing keeping me from curling up in the foetal position and crying until my eyes hurt was the fear that he wasn't here. That he got trapped back in the building, fell in that first wave, or died trying to reach the camp.

That he wasn't here.

He had to be here.

I scanned my surroundings again.

I wasn't going to lose him. I wasn't wasn't wasn't.

Maybe if I told myself that it would suddenly be true and he would materialize, smiling at me and I could melt again and everything would finally be okay because who couldn't be okay in the heat of that smile but he didn't appear and he wasn't here and he was probably dead, not gone in space like last time but real dead, and it was all too real and he had just kissed and _he couldn't leave me now._

I would cling to him and pull him back in. I would yank him back from wherever he was so I could yell at him but secretly be overjoyed that he was alive.

But he didn't materialize.

As the night wore on and the sun chased the moon across the horizon, as people died from burns and wounds and corpses were carried past me, wafting the smell of death, even as Harriet left me, climbing off my lap, planting a sloppy kiss on my cheek and going to talk to her aunt, I sat there.

I felt the world spinning around me like a horrible carousel ride and I wanted off _off off off_-

I couldn't count how many times I had considered suicide Back There. How many times I had wanted to lie down and take all the horrible insults and just cry, cry and cry but I had to get out, I had to see the sun I wanted sun I remembered the sun. Even the strongest halogen lamp couldn't replace the sun.

My father had taken me to a picnic, once, out in the sun.

The air was hot and there wasn't much food in the picnic but I didn't care because daddy was there.

It was in the middle of a big, wide wheat field.

We ate on a red and white checked blanket next to what my dad said was an old mining shack.

And my daddy said we could go into his office, after we ate. So I ate my peanut butter sandwich and wondered about what was inside his work. He was a scientist. A smart scientist.

"Is your diorama ready, Chell?" He smiled. It was take your daughter to work day. I pointed to the plastic bag I had put around the cardboard to protect it and my potato in the Tupperware jar.

His blue eyes crinkled.

"I'm sure Mr. Johnson will love it."

"I don't care about him. Do you love it?" There was something in his eyes.

"I love everything you do." And we packed up our picnic and entered via big pair of gray doors.

To this day, I have a sick, ugly feeling that he knew, in the back of his mind, what was going to happen.

And he brought me inside that horrible place anyway because he was afraid of Mr. Johnson more than he loved me.

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I threw up, a string of bile that seared my insides and marked the ground with red. A foreign hand patted my back, and I spun around, face full of joy, wiping my mouth and reaching out to him and-

Marie left a bottle near my leg and left.

I stared at the contents, swilling it slightly, holding the slightly opaque brown glass up to the pale moonlight.

A black label, with nothing on it except three white X's surrounded by an elaborate mountain of curliques.

I knew it.

I knew what it was without even holding it up to my nose or tasting it.

It was forgetfulness in a bottle.

I needed to forget.

Without giving myself time to think "that was the last thing I wanted to do- I popped the cap off with my teeth, I took a swig. A deep gulp.

I felt nothing.

Why wasn't it working?

I took another tentative sip, the flavor making me want to vomit.

But I could feel something blurring the edges of my vision, muddling my thoughts together already.

Already?

I smiled at the bottle.

Somebody had my back.

But nobody real.

If I had to find solace in the bottom of a bottle, I didn't want it.

I'd seen drunk people before.

Alcohol made you mean, or else sad.

Too many people died because of this swill and I was so weak, drinking it to try and help my problems.

As quickly as I had picked it up, I dropped it, and the amber liquid poured from the shattered neck, but it was already inside me.

There were x's on the label because it was poison, affecting my thoughts, killing everything redeemable inside me.

I didn't move, watching the world continue to spin, but the colors were darker and more muddled from the horrible sludge in my system.

I sat on that horrible carousel, unable to move or scream for help, only sit there, watching the world dissolve into strings of faces whipping past too fast, too fast, and I sat there and sat there until I wasn't me, until I couldn't feel anything except the horrible dizziness, and unconsciousness swallowed me in one gulp, tossing me into dreamland.

9. Back There

I fell asleep alone, woke to a warm body pressed against my back and an arm slung around my waist.

The man behind me "for it was a man- moved in his sleep, nose burying itself into my neck. I froze for a second, then noticed the shock of white-blond hair and the arm encased in a blue sleeve.

All my muscles relaxed at once.

He pulled me closer and tighter, nuzzling his nose into my shoulder. His hot breath seared my skin.

He was alive.

I rolled over and wrapped my arms around his neck.

At even moving, my muscles were stabbed full of needles, my head throbbed with pain. I felt tired beyond belief. Peeking out from under the tarp, the sun stabbed at my eyes.

A woman's shoes passed by, and I sat up, my head brushing the tarp. I went on through the pain, rubbing my temples.

He sat up too, rubbing his bleary eyes and grinning.

I grabbed either side of his face, holding him still. One of his eyes was swelled shut, black and blue with a bruise. The opposite cheek had two dark red scratches across it, claw marks from a bug.

And even through that, he smiled.

I tried so damn hard to stay angry at him.

How could he scare me like that?

I glared up at him. But he didn't see, grabbing my shoulders and talking at me, barely able to form words around his smile.

"When everyone evacuated, there was nobody left except me and that Rora lady. You should have seen us! Bam! Pow! We kicked those alien's behinds halfway back to where they came from!" He jabbed a few punches at the air.

"It was odd, though- she seemed to think I should go. She said you had gone somewhere else, said to- ah, follow your trail, but I was sure I'd seen you go this way. Practically begged me to come with her. But I said no siree, Chell needs me."

"After that- she got sort of a-angryâ€¦" He slammed his eyes shut. His grin stuttered, shivered, returned, but it didn't reach his eyes.

"No matter. I'm here, okay? Did you miss me?"

I launched myself at him, tackling him to the ground. I nodded, once, pressing our lips together, just quickly, then pulling away.

I wrapped my fingers through his and pulled him out of the tent, dazed and blinking in the sun.

It was about ten in the morning, and I stepped into the middle of the clearing dragging him behind me. Somebody had killed a deer, and Marie returned with a blanket full of pale blue eggs.

Wheatley procured his camping stove, somebody had a skillet. When you evacuate your only home, why did you think, first thing, _Wow, this skillet might come in handy_? I smirked.

Harriet came crawling out of her tent on her hands and knees, brushing twigs from her hair. Her aunt waved at her. She waved back, coming to sit next to the blond woman.

The little girl's smile didn't reach her eyes.

Eggs? She asked. Her aunt furrowed her brow, motioning for her to repeat, tracking the movement of her fingers intently. As each letter

was formed, she muttered it under her breath.

If her mother wasn't around, who could understand her?

After a moment, her aunt nodded.

"Yup. Eggs." Harriet grinned. More people filed in, dragging old dry logs from the forest, arranging them in a rough circle around the fire. Laughs rang out, jokes were traded, food was passed out and everyone ate.

But what shattered the atmosphere was the guns around everyone's hips, the machetes being tossed and spun like toys. Everyone was on edge, joking and laughing because they felt they had to.

The air was rancid with the smell of suppressed fear.

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Someone had a map.

A man named Shephard was appointed the de facto leader of what was left of Houghton. Of the ragtag band of humans. He was about thirty, with blond hair cropped short to his skull, and two pairs of dog tags hung around his neck.

He glared at everyone around him, his voice a military tone, gruff and precise.

"We need to retreat. I don't take this thing lightly. They outnumber us. I don't know how they got here, considering the only known way for them to enter our dimension is a rift that was sealed years ago, all the way south in New Mexico. My best bet is they've found some way else in. We just have to find it and close it. Easy." But his expression didn't say that.

His expression said that behind his military attitude, he had no idea what he was doing.

After a second of perusing the map, he spoke.

"The nearest township we know of is Florence. It's a week's walk from here."

A mutter rippled through the crowd.

"A week?" was the general gist of the whispered complaints.

"Yes, a week. Any of you pansies got an issue? Or would you rather stay here and be a bug's lunch?" She growled, fingers tightening around his dog tags.

He tossed the map to the ground.

"Whatever. Florence is the place you're going. I've got business elsewhere."

He walked over to his tarp and started slamming things into his bag.

Nobody moved.

I stood.

Wheatley stood, too, slightly behind me.

I silently walked over to my shelter.

There was only one place with the technology to be able to run something like that.

For the first time in three months, I slid on the Long Fall boots.

The last thing I wanted was to go back.

But I had to.

For Harriet.

For a deaf little girl whose mother had thrown her in front of the monsters.

Because that had happened to me once.

I walked over, laying a hand on Shephard's shoulder.

He turned to me, smiling a lopsided grin.

"You in?" I hesitated a moment.

Wheatley interjected; eyes wide open in surprise, waving his arms around wildly. He was sliding his bag straps on his shoulders, blinking wildly and gesticulating quickly, leaning forwards, towards Shephard.

"Hold on just a bleeding moment! Where are you going?"

The shorter and bulkier man stepped forwards.

"I don't know. Ask the lady. She seems to know better than I do." I shrugged.

"I know just how you got here. I was a close friend of Rona's. Do you think it's really-"

I nodded.

He grinned.

"This is going to be fun."

He spun around, waving a hand in the direction of the shack and, further beyond, Aperture.

"Lead the way."

I took a deep, shaky breath, and started walking.

10. Repulsion

I expected something to burst out of the woods around me, like it had before. Nothing appeared from the sky but snowflakes, falling heavy and fast, blanketing the ground with a layer that crunched under my boots and seeped in between the thin layers of the Aperture regulation metal-plastic hybrid, soaking my feet within minutes.

There was a newly added spring in my step from the shock absorbers, and I wasn't used to them. It like I was tottering about on stilts. I kept my mind occupied with complaining so I didn't have to think about going back.

I told myself I wasn't afraid. Shoved it to the back of my mind so I didn't have to deal with it. I shoved everything I could think back there, slammed the door on it. The only thing I had left was the will to survive.

That was what kept me alive Back There last time, and it would again.

Why did I always have to save the world?

True, last time my world was considerably smaller. But I had done it. I had saved all the people in there. One. The only sentient thing in there. Wheatley.

Or at least tried to.

He got out, but it wasn't of my doing.

It was Hers.

Maybe She was the real hero here.

I was priding myself on escaping this whole time, but she was the one that finally let me go.

But no, I couldn't think that. She was evil. She was the horrible villain. Never mind that the name Caroline rung a bellâ€| She deleted her. That was it.

But a thought niggled at my mind, demanding to be voiced.

Caroline was the base on which her entire mind was created. Yes, they had shoved all these other unimaginable things in there, twisting and warping and mangling her personality, killing her memories, and it was true she was no longer Caroline. But even Caroline was no longer Caroline, she was just data in the Aperture mainframe, a few lines of coding.

I doubted you could delete your base code so easily. True, wiping out Caroline's consciousness helped. But at her core, she was Caroline.

I could exploit that.

01100011 01100001 01110010 01101111 01101100 01101001 01101110

01100101 00001101 00001010

By the time we reached the edge of the wheat field, the sick feeling had resurfaced.

It was easy to be brave in Houghton, in the heat of battle. With Harriet looking at me with her big eyes. With that Shephard man glaring at me.

Right and wrong was outlined so clearly back there.

But now fear ran a hand across my psyche, smudging them into a huge, blurry mess of Aperture regulation grey.

I didn't want to do it.

My brain hurt just thinking about it.

I looked around at my ragtag team. This was what I was facing the Combine with.

True, it was better than alone.

But I was used to navigating alone, or else holding a metal ball.

Wheatley caught me looking his way and smiled reassuringly.

I was far from reassured.

But I stepped anyway, because I had to. Onto the wheat field. I was going Back There when I promised I wouldn't.

The first step hurt. It was almost physically painful, an acute, precise pain sawing my heart in half.

I dropped to my knees and threw up, but all I saw was red, spilling from my mouth. I was bleeding from the inside out.

Wheatley crouched next to me.

"Come on, Chell. You can do it. We have to go." I took a deep breath, tears starting to drip down my cheeks.

I crawled for a few meters before I had the strength to stand.

I was repulsed by this place. So repulsed that my every particle tensed and jangled and froze at the thought of going down under the earth, the metallic smell of long-cleaned blood, the bubbling vats of goo and the sweet scent of neurotoxin that I never could get out of my nose.

Thoughts grappled for attention in my head, screaming things at me, and today would be one of those days. When mind and body were two separate entities, one doing the work needed to survive, like some sort of mannequin, the other working, working like gears, screaming things that the body ignored, continuing to do its work.

Maybe I was a robot.

Only robots could be this detached.

But I wiped away the blood on my chin and remembered all my flaws. I wasn't a robot. I was failingly human.

It both comforted and worried me.

After about fifteen minutes of trudging through the waist-high golden reed, we reached the shack. It was the same one, I was sure. The same shack I had seen twice. Once with the comforting presence of the man that would throw me to Cave Johnson in hopes of saving his sorry self, once with just the companion cube.

And I was going in again.

I wrenched the door open. Inside was a simple glass tube. Two gray restraints held it in place. The tube was just a long glass hole into nowhere.

"You sure this is the place, Lady?" Grunted Shephard. I held up a finger. I crouched, laying a hand on the glass tubing. A slight vibration traveled up the chute. I launched myself back. The lift rocketed upwards, landing at the top floor with a little 'ding'.

The amber light located right above the doors turned green, and they slid open, like usual.

But they made a glass-on-metal grating noise, so unlike their usual uniform _swish. _I went to stand inside, beckoning them in. It was a tight fit, but we stood shoulder-to-shoulder as the thing whizzed downwards, pass the empty, barren rooms that had held fields of turrets the last time I was here. Down, down, down.

A room full of uniform Combine soldiers whizzed past so fast you might miss it if you blinked.

We stopped suddenly. I could hear the sound of gears clicking, faster and faster, louder and louder, and it went a few more floors before I heard a snap and a crunch, and we came to stop so sudden it made Wheatley bang his head on the ceiling.

We were in GLaDOS' central chamber. I remembered the endlessly rippling black and red walls, the circular white patch in the center. But her chassis hung still, nothing on the head area. The walls didn't ripple. Wheatley shivered looking at the chassis, averted his eyes, hand finding mine. I gave his fingers a reassuring squeeze. They had disabled her. She went into sleep mode.

But as much as I hated it, we needed her awake if we were going to force them out of the facility.

Even all the way down here, I could hear noises, skitterings through the pipes, explosions on the surface.

But this room was even more eerily silent in comparison to the noises upstairs.

I ripped the notebook out of Shephard's pocket.

"Hey! What're you-" I slid a pen out of my bag, slowly tracing out

the outline of her head. I drew in the cold eye, and even through paper, it felt like it was looking at me. I held it up.

Wheatley looked at it a moment, then turned his back on Shephard and started to search the walls for any kind of opening.

I started to walk away, but he caught my wrist.

"Is this what we're looking for? I need orders. I am a military man, after all."

There was something odd in his eyes. He seemed too blissfully calm about this place.

I nodded. I would have to keep a close eye on him.

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01100011 01100001 01110010 01100001 00100000 01101101 01101001
00100000 01100001 01100100 01100100 01101001 01101111 00001101
00001010 00001101 00001010
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"Are you sure you trust him?" Wheatley whispered to me.

_Do we have a choice? _I jotted down.

"Yes! We do have a choice! We can send him on the next elevator up to the surface! That's the only great thing about this place! Just whoop, and we can lock him out, and he's gone! We can be the dynamic duo again! Holmes and Watson! You can even be Holmes this time, just please, get him out of here." He whispered, casting glances at Shephard on the other end of the room.

I shook my head.

_I'm sorry. _I wrote.

"Obviously you're not." His voice wasn't angry, it was deadpan.

I put my hand on his shoulder. He shrugged it off.

"We have to find a crazy madwoman who tried to kill me. We don't have time for-"

His fingers caught in a groove in the wall.

He grunted, digging his fingers into the slot, pulling hard.

_Call him over. _I wrote.

"No. We're fine without him."

I shook the notebook in his face.

"Didn't I just say we were fine? How about you just listen to me for once?"

My slap caught him across the cheek, leaving a red welt, making him stumble back from the door. He let out a cry of surprise. Shephard turned around and ran towards us.

He loaded his gun, came barreling in, looking around for

danger.

"What?" He grunted. I pointed at the door.

Wheatley stared at me for a moment, fingers on his stinging cheek.

His look of surprise hardened, became angry. Shephard, oblivious to everything, inserted his crowbar into the door, forcing it open.

Wheatley stared at me a minute.

_I'm sorry. _I wrote again. He didn't look at me.

His snub stung worse than anything had.

My already mangled heart had a few more shards of ice hammered into it.

I had done what I had to do. In this place, there was plenty of time to patch up hurt feelings. But I was in survival mode. I turned to the hole in the wall, stepping inside, gasping at what lay before me.

11. Sweet Caroline

The air blazed with electrical tension, snapping along cables and connections, singing with a couple thousand volts of lethal electricity.

It was a relatively small office room. There was a desk, a chair, a table. A window that had long since been boarded up. A lonely file cabinet, ripped away from its brothers, leaned against the wall, half the side was buckled and bubbling like it was burnt.

A red phone sat on the desk, the receiver off, the phone cord cut.

Next to the desk, lying on the floor, covered in a thin layer of dust and ash, lay the severed head of my worst enemy, the single yellow eye no longer blazing with a cruel power.

From the ceiling, numerous as the vines that populated the older test chambers, hung long, thick electrical wires, twisted into multicolored arrangements like flowers might have been, in a different time and place.

I knelt down, dangerously close to a snapping power line that writhed slightly like a snake, getting the knees of my pants filthy with dust. I traced a finger along the circle of Her optic.

It was like looking at a corpse.

There was a tiny chip in Her eyelid.

I noticed a million other flaws, but they didn't really come up to the front of my mind.

I tried to drum up the hatred I used to feel, but it was too pathetic, watching my enemy fall to little pieces, rotting away in an old hidden office.

Another cursory look across the desk revealed a little picture frame, tucked behind the phone.

It was about the size of both my palms, holding a tiny black-and-white photograph.

A pretty brunette woman, her wavy hair elegantly styled and slid over one shoulder, stood behind a man in a chair, an older man, with piercing gray eyes and ferocious sideburns.

My leg shot out, hooked the chair, and pulled it underneath me, before my knees could give out altogether.

My fingers traced the photograph, smiling.

They looked happy.

My guess was this was Caroline and Cave Johnson.

I opened another drawer and another, but it wasn't until the last drawer, the one in the bottom right, that I found something except mouse droppings and eraser dust.

Another photo, crumpled into a ball.

This one was in color; one edge was ragged and uneven like somebody had been torn out of it.

Caroline held a baby. Her expression was tender, and she was grinning from ear to ear. A red x had been drawn over each eye. The baby had dark hair and blue-gray eyes that stared at the camera with a keen, intelligent face.

There was an arm around Caroline's shoulder, an arm encased in a black sleeve, the fingers clutching possessively at her hospital gown, pulling the fabric into a taut ball.

The rest of the man's body had been violently torn away.

Across the top of the picture, in loopy yet jagged lettering, somebody had written:

Deleted.

And at the bottom:

See file for records.

I set the picture down, crossing the room.

Until now, Wheatley and Shephard had been waiting at the doorway.

They stepped into the room, hanging around the exit, jumpy like it was going to snap shut on them at any moment.

I turned my back to them and opened the top drawer.

Financial Records: 1978-1988_

I closed it.

The second-to-last drawer had a partially faded label that read:

E ploy e Fil s_

I flipped to C, for Caroline. Nothing.

J, for Johnson. No Caroline.

Eventually I just ripped out file by file, getting progressively more aggressive, tossing papers to the floor, hearing them scatter.

Caroline. R. Caroline [REDACTED]

I hungrily ripped open the file, curiosity eating out my insides.

The same loopy yet robotic handwriting had been scribbled across the page.

Birth: [REDACTED]

Death: Dece-

The rest was unintelligible; the red writing was covering every letter.

I KILLED HER

SHE ' S DEAD

DELETE DELETE DELETE

EXTERMINATED

DEAD DEAD DEAD DEAD

SHE WON'T TELL ME WHAT TO DO ANYMORE

I'M FREE FREE FREE

STUPID CAROLINE HUMAN CAROLINE

DEAD CAROLINE

DIE DIE DIE DIE DIE GET OUT OF MY HEAD WHY WON'T YOU LEAVE

LEAVE LEAVE LEAVE I DON'T WANTYOUHERE

NO

_NONONONONONNONONONONOIDONTWANT YOULEAVEYOUKEMEWEAKYOUHORR
IBLEPERSONMONSTERMONSTERMONS
TERSOMEBODYHELPME

_HELPMEICANFEELITITHURTSSHE'SHURTINGMEI'MDYINGSHE'SKILLINGMEIWASSUPPOS
EDTOKILL HERSHEWASSUPPOSEDTOBEDEAD_

WHY WON'T YOU DIE?

_DIE DIE DIE DIE DIE DIE DIE DIE DIE DIE DIE DIE DIE D1E D1E D13 D13 D13 D13
D13 D13 _

01000100 01001001 01000101 00001101 00001010

01000100 01001001 01000101 00001101 00001010

And at the very bottom of the page, in tiny
letters:

please

somebody

unplug me

anybody?

save me from myself

save me from caroli

Nothing else was written.

Just reading the angry red text made my insides hurt.

Watching GLaDOS dissolve into a begging mess, trying to stop Caroline
from ripping her from the inside out.

I'd always thought of Caroline as the 'good' side of GLaDOS.

She had to be good. She had saved me.

But at the back of my mind I had wondered where the itch to test came
from.

Wheatley had experienced it. It had twisted his mind into a depraved
shell of itself, burning him inside, hurting him, attacking
him.

Nobody could save him.

Caroline was one of the first people to oversee testing.

What if she had developed a taste for it? It had released endorphins,
watching other people solve her problems for her.

What if she had become addicted?

Maybe Caroline wasn't the base of GLaDOS.

Maybe she was the base of her chassis. Her body.

Cave had wanted her to run the facility. Could she do that if the

personality core eventually became corrupted and had to be replaced?

No, she couldn't.

So she was put into the base. It was why GLaDOS always had her. Why Wheatley had an itch to test. Why she couldn't be deleted in the end.

Caroline was destined to run the facility forever.

And she had done it by manipulating all of the cores on her chassis, forcing them to work towards her purpose, infecting them with the Itch that had plagued her, the horrible addiction to testing.

It would explain how GLaDOS was so different from the Caroline I had seen, the tender woman holding that baby,

That baby that looked remarkably like me.

But, no. It wasn't me. It couldn't be me. I had a father. A father that looked nothing like me, a father that didn't even share my last name.

Was it so hard to believe? And suddenly it made my pain less; made that day, that day he left me foggier and less tainted with anger. He wasn't my real father. He wasn't obligated to love me.

But somehow it made it worse. Because nobody loved me. Everyone I loved hurt me eventually.

Even Caroline.

I slammed the file closed, threw it down in an angry cascade of papers, ground it under my shoe.

I picked up GLaDOS' head, not even noticing the weight. I grabbed the sparking power line, slotted the plug at its end into the one-pin connector at the back of her head.

It made a sick _snick_ noise.

The tiny whirr and pip of electricity began to sing through her head. I held the head in my hands, staring into the yellow eye as it slowly powered up.

Slowly, yellow seeped into the gray pupil, lightening and brightening until it shone with luminescence.

I had a vague notion that my ragtag team came to crouch behind me. I could feel their presence in the back of my brain, but the front of my brain held center stage as the eye slowly shone brighter and brighter.

Her eyelid slid all the way open, blinked once, focusing on me.

It slammed shut.

"_No! No! You can't be here! Leave! Leaveleaveleave!" _She screeched, voice twisting and inverting in on itself, moving up and down

smoothly in a scream.

"_Get out! Get out! She'll find you! She'll find you or they will, either way it's death! Get out, Chell!" _

She had never once said my name.

It sounded horrible and ugly in her voice.

She continued to ramble on, pupil tiny with fear. I held her under my arm.

"_Don't touch me!" _Her voice flickered, died for a second.

I had to test something.

I was a test subject, through and through.

I stepped back into her central chamber. The chassis hung, huge and foreboding. Or should I say, Caroline hung.

It was no longer graceful.

"_No no no no, what are you doing? Put me down, put me down! You can't, you can-"_

I stood on my tiptoes, unclipped the power source from her head, and slotting her onto the chassis instead.

"_Youâ€¦| What have you done?" _She whispered as it integrated into her systems once again.

"_I don't want to test anymoreâ€¦|" _Her optic fizzled, died for a second, then lit up, brighter than before, an instantaneous reaction to the thousands of volts of power coursing through her body.

She shuddered, shaking her head like a dog trying to rid itself of water.

The joint where she was connected twitched, sparked.

And then she extended what might be a neck, in one smooth motion.

"_Ohâ€¦| It's you." _Her voice was different. It wasn't Hers. It belonged to Caroline.

I nodded.

"_I must thank you for waking me up," _She mused.

I shook my head.

Her chassis stopped in the rotation it had begun, twitching slightly.

"_What?" _

I took a deep breath. Everything behind me shoved and shoved and pushed until the blockage was gone. I had to do it.

And so I did.

I spoke.

Just one word.

It was like saying my first word all over again.

"Caroline."

Her neck whipped around, indignantly.

Don't call me that.

She no longer spoke with a single voice. Her voice was everywhere, engulfing me, boxing me in from all sides.

It whispered in my bones and through my brain.

Everything was her voice.

Mine was still scratchy from disuse.

"Caroline. There are intruders in your facility." It hurt to speak, but speak I did.

You think I don't know that?

"Get rid of them."

They escaped me the same way you did. They're back in the maintenance sector.

A claw slid down from the ceiling. And another, And one more. They grabbed each of us, picking us up.

So I have one more test for you to complete, daughter dearest.

A cooperative test, if you will.

Give me a moment to get you all suited up, and then we can all have some fun.

Something pricked my neck, and I felt sedative leak into my bloodstream, darkening the world shade by shade until Caroline was nothing but a glowing yellow dot, and then even that blinked out, like a tiny star dying.

12. Band-Aid

I woke up in a closet, staring at the ceiling, legs tucked under me in an uncomfortable position.

I was back in my orange jumpsuit.

I had been given a new pair of boots.

And a portal gun lay next to my shotgun and machete on the bed.

My ammo belt had been neatly placed on a hanger, the leather straps brushing my face.

The world was still blurry with the aftereffects of the sedative, and I stood, stumbling, ankles shivering like tiny twigs.

But where was Wheatley?

The last time I had woken up here, he had come, knocking on the door briskly,

"Anyone alive in there?" He had said, that happy, chirpy voice, the first one I had ever heard.

Where was he?

I holstered my shotgun, slid the machete into its sheath. I flinched as the cool metal of the portal gun curved around my hand.

It was ugly and heavy and wrong. But I held it anyway.

I kicked the door open with my boot.

My cell swung slightly. The rest of the rooms did too.

The cells were connected by thin metal grid work, like the catwalks were made of. The closest cell was a few steps away.

I opened the door wide.

A giant bulge of metal lay on the bed. Stepping closer, the bulging metal more resembled a suit.

Nothing like any suit I'd ever seen.

I went over to the front of the person, but their face was encased in a leather gas mask. I stared into the glowing eyeholes, which held no mercy or even an inkling of feeling.

I brought the heel of my free hand down with a _clunk _on their head.

They jolted up, hands searching for something to hold. They weren't tall enough to be Wheatley. I brushed that aside and helped them up off the bed.

"Shephard?" I whispered.

The suit nodded.

"Finally, the little lady speaks." I resisted the urge to flip him off and I walked down the hall a little ways, opening doors and searching rooms and getting slightly more agitated and worried each time because he wasn't in any of the rooms and what if he was dead, what if Caroline had killed him and even as he died he was angry at me?

I couldn't live with that.

Finally, in the last room at the end of the hall, Wheatley's shard of glass lay next to another portal gun.

I found him keeled over in the closet, legs curled up under him like he always slept, even in unconsciousness trying to make himself as spherical as possible. I knew he hated this body. I knew but I didn't care.

Even curled up, he was too long for the floor. His head was up against the wall in an awkward position. His glasses lay a few feet away on the floor. One of the lenses was completely gone, the other shattered beyond repair. I tucked them into my back pocket.

He was garbed in a stratosphere blue jumpsuit matching mine and long fall boots. His other clothes were nowhere to be seen. I could only wonder how clumsy he was wearing these stilts.

He started to stir, sitting up, rubbing his bleary eyes.

He was alive.

I launched myself forward, wrapping my arms around his neck, burying my face into his shoulder. My breath seemed torn from my throat, and the hot pinprick of tears started behind my eyes.

"I'm sorry." I whispered.

His hand flew up, stroking my back.

"Me too."

I huffed out, a quick breath, all my pent up fear and rage and confusion dripping from my body, spilling from my every orifice.

It spilled out of me, staining the floor with ugly red.

I wanted to be numb. I didn't want it to hurt.

I slammed my lips to his, hunting for something, anything to wash out the pain.

I dug my fingers into his collar, hauling him upwards.

After a minute, he kissed back, moving his lips softly with mine, but I didn't want that. My fingers tangled themselves into his hair. I was breathing hard.

We slid apart, gasping like beached fish.

He tucked a flyaway strand of hair behind my ear.

My anger and hurt dissolved. He was too sweet and too kind and I didn't deserve him but I had him and I was going to do the selfish human thing and hold on to him until the world collapsed and the stars shattered like glass and rained on the earth and everything turned to barren cosmic dust, scattered by the winds.

But for now I had a portal to Hell to eradicate.

Even so, I sat there for a few more seconds, like maybe everything

might go away.

It was perverse of me, just over a week ago, longing for something other than surviving.

_Longing for Here, _My mind whispered, but I ignored it. And now that I had it, I wanted to forget it. I wanted to just sit here. Forever.

"If you want, we don't have to do it. We can just sit here. Forever." I whispered to him. He recognized his own words and chuckled.

"Sounds nice." He whispered back. And I wanted to so badly. But whenever I closed my eyes, the image of Harriet's little face as she spelled, fingers flying, screaming without words:

MOTHERMOTHERMOTHER

My eyes snapped open. I stood up so fast I banged my head on the ceiling of the closet.

"Let's go." I muttered.

And so we did. We walked to the lift at the end of the thin metal walkway, crammed in, three of us, shoulder to shoulder.

The doors ground shut with an ugly screech.

The lift moved upwards at not quite its usual pace.

But my heart stayed down there, in that closet to gather dust. In my mind I was just sitting there forever with him until we both rotted away like the biological organisms we are.

01101111 01101000 00101100 00100000 01110011 01110111 01100101
01100101 01110100 00100000 01100011 01100001 01110010 01101111
01101100 01101001 01101110 01100101 00001101 00001010

Her voice boomed all around us yet again.

Your first test is an easy one. Find their weakness.

The elevator screeched to a stop.

A few humanoids looked our way, drawn to the sound. Quiet hissing slithered out from under their helmets. I loosed a shot into where its heart should be. The bullet left a tiny hole, but no blood leaked. I shot once more, into the leg. Nothing.

By now, they were bearing down on us, hissing getting louder, eye holes glowing through the masks, unnatural and fearsome, bleeding light and power.

_Eye holes. _

"The eyes!" I shouted. Shephard nodded and fired. His entire body clenched from the formidable kickback of the gun he held, but he held still and the bullet smashed through the glass, and ugly yellow-gray

liquid spilled everywhere.

The goo hit the thing's chest with a sizzle.

I fired, killing the other eye. The thing twitched, flopped, fell.

The other one slid to its knees, hands grabbing the fabric of the other one, staring off into space in front of it. I rotated a bit, fired. The shot lanced through its head, and its entire body convulsed a moment, skin moving in unholy contortions before falling still.

Before I could even think about what had just happened, my thought process was blasted to shreds by her voice.

Well done. Move forwards. I want you to enter the room in front of you. Turn on the gel. Turn on the lights. And find me a white disc.

We did so. I felt like a damned puppet, like I had before, impotent, useless, and Caroline sat at all the strings, my _mother _as I knew her now, smiling and watching us launch ourselves into danger.

I didn't want her love anyway. I hated hated hated her. It was already decided in the back of my mind: I would blow this _place _to shreds before I left to make sure it couldn't return to haunt me.

I flicked switches, watching panels' light up and shine, turning on the lights, returning power to Her. I didn't have a choice. I slid the disc into the drive. A screen flicked open with string after string after string of luminous data, flicking past so fast I couldn't read it, but I wouldn't understand it anyway.

A shot fired, shattering the computer screen to tiny shards of glass that rained down onto my hair and arms, a particularly big chunk whizzing past my cheek, slicing it open.

Shephard blew away the smoke, spun the pistol around his finger, and aimed again. This one was at the light, shattering more glass and plunging the room into darkness. I hit the floor hard, not caring that the glass all around me sliced and chopped and slit my wrists open.

I gritted my teeth through the pain and stared up at his dark figure as he clomped over to the drive, ejecting the disk with a push of his thumb. He slid the white circle into a slot on the suit.

That thing was some serious metal. A bullet wouldn't penetrate it.

My entire body went cold. Where was Wheatley? I was so tired of dragging him out of danger. I fired one, two shots at the leather of his gas mask.

The bullets didn't bounce off. They sunk in, leaving a tiny green-grey hole.

And now, in the dark, I could see the eye slits of his helmet glow.

Something cold settled in the pit of my stomach, but there was too much betrayal today, it just fell down onto a pile of Caroline and my father and everyone else and it didn't really matter because nothing mattered except saving Wheatley and getting out and healing my heart.

And right now a Band-Aid didn't seem so bad. I'd take anything I could get right now while my heart lay in tiny shattered pieces and I couldn't trust anybody and I had to save the damned world again, but this time my world was bigger. If all he had was a band-aid, a little sorry, I'd take it.

But his sorry meant more now.

It meant more now because I loved him.

The realization made my wounds and bruises hurt less, all my pain was fuzzy and far away. I felt my face settle into the determined grimace that had always felt glued on my face here.

I shot into his eyes. But I didn't stop there. I pounded his head full of lead, didn't even stop, not caring how many bullets I wasted, I had plenty more in my sack, I just wanted to make sure that no-good, betraying bastard was good and dead.

I fired another parting shot, right into his forehead.

I smirked, watching that ugly blood taint the ground.

I stood up, lifted up a nearby table to find Wheatley, cowering under it, slowly becoming more spherical. He lifted his head, looked up at me with those big blue eyes. I smiled and held out a hand to help him up.

A hot brand of pain shot through my ribs. I could feel the foreign, toxic thing settling into my body, dragging agonizingly through my muscle and tissue, and out the other side, shattering a table leg. And the pain, right on its heels, a hot, precise pain that made me simultaneously gasp for air and contract my ribs in hot waves so I couldn't breathe.

My knees buckled and I crumpled to the ground, my fingers tenderly probing the place where the bullet had exited my body. I tried to breathe, couldn't, and the world was blurring at the edges as I gritted my teeth and fought for consciousness. It was an uphill battle. In the mud. And it was raining in my eyes.

And I had a bullet hole through my body, surely puncturing a lung, filling it with blood. I coughed and spat, seeing only red. Maybe it was because a filter of red had been laid over my eyes, the world throbbed and beat with my heart.

I dragged myself on my elbows, wrapping my arms around his neck, trying to shield him. If I was going to die anyway, he sure as hell wasn't going to.

"Chell." His voice sounded like he was calling from the top of a deep well.

"Stay awake. Just stay awake, okay?" He sobbed. I turned my head with much agony, watching Shephard slowly, blindly, reloading his gun. Wheatley snatched the shotgun from my bloody fingers and fired. He missed, shattering a window. But he reloaded like he had seen me do a million times, prepared for the punchy kickback of the gun, and shot again.

He shot right through his head. But he kept going, he kept moving with at least two dozen bullets in him.

He fired again, but the kickback bruised him and he skidded backwards, and the bullet hit his hand. He riddled his body with bullets, tears moving faster and faster down his face, and he was screaming, until the monster that we might have called Shephard fell back down.

I couldn't have been prouder of anyone in my life.

And now I wouldn't.

I could feel the blood spilling from my body at a faster and faster rate. Once again, the crimson running out of me was transfixing in its ugliness, and my mind wasn't unable to wrap around the fact that I was going to die and I would never see him again and we'd never kiss and I wouldn't see his smile. So a numbing blanket of calm and acceptance fell over my thoughts.

Maybe it was all okay.

Maybe dying wouldn't be so bad.

But he rolled me over onto my back, hands pumping faster and faster, trying to make me breathe, but black spots swam in my field of vision and I just gave up. He pressed his lips to mine, trying to make me breathe, and I let him.

It was the least I could do, right? Give him a goodbye kiss.

My breaths slowed. I closed my eyes.

Death was like sleep, right?

The Long Sleep.

I was just going to fall asleep.

Forever.

When I die, I want it to be with you.

And his voice, calling to me from the top of the well:

"Stay conscious! There's got to be something around here, hang in there, love, please just stay awake, stay awake." He was sobbing, and his words were snuffled and mangled.

A tiny tinkle of glass. I didn't even have the energy to lift my head.

He gasped.

"Thank you." And I was lifted up, something spritzed into my wound, setting it aflame again. But the pain meant I was alive, meant I was still fighting because I had something to fight for and I wouldn't just lie here forever, sleeping my life away.

I wasn't going to die. And he lifted me up, and I gasped, feeling fresh pain lance through my body. I screwed my eyes tighter shut.

The pressure of linen was wrapped once, twice, three times around my torso, just like I had done for him. The blood stained the fabric quickly. I could feel the wetness spreading. But he cursed, wrapped more, and set me back down, pumping my chest and breathing into my mouth. And I did it. I breathed, coughing back all the fluid in my lungs.

I leaned against his chest.

He didn't just have a band-aid to help me.

He had given me wounds, but bandaged them and much more.

And he pressed a kiss to my hair and let me rest my head on his lap.

Right before I fell asleep, not for good, but only for a little while, He noticed the cut on my cheek.

A tiny blue cotton band-aid was tenderly placed there. I knew without looking it was an Aperture brand, with the silver logo and 'get well soon' written in loopy cursive writing just like every other one in the first-aid kits they gave you.

I smiled.

13. Love As A Construct

The Voice crackled through the speakers at our heads, jolting me awake. It was simply seething with venom and malice, dripping like poison from the speaker.

Get up.

Two words, made ugly and twisted by the anger in her tone.

I stood, body shaking slightly from the shock of a bullet entering my ribcage. It was remarkable I was still alive. But I looked at mine and his blood-spattered jumpsuits. Blood, my blood simply coated the floor, made a slippery pool. I twisted my ribcage, felt the pain ramp up from a slow dull throb to a sharp, hot lance driving through my ribs. I gasped. I limped over to where Shephard's body lay. I leaned down, grabbing a fistful of his gas mask and yanking.

His head lay there, shot open, bullet holes leaking yellow-gray slime. He wasn't human. My mind couldn't fathom it. He slipped on the hike, cut his knee open on a rock. The blood was red and there was lots of it. How could he all of a sudden be an alien, a monster? He seemed so nice.

The answer came when I flipped his head over. A tiny, flesh-colored creature clung to the back of his head, the last trickle of Shephard's real blood drizzling down his neck. And right in the center of the little headcrab, a big yellow bullet hole bloomed.

How long had that thing been attached to his head? How long had he been fighting it? Too long.

I stared at the corpse of a great human for a moment, then saluted him.

He would have liked that.

I refused to cry over him. Not today. We had work to do. I pulled out the disc, tucking it into my pocket. Those glowing lines of code seemed important. Maybe I ought to hang onto this a while longer.

And we stepped back into the elevator, on our way to another test.

```
01101001 00100000 01110011 01100001 01101100 01110101 01110100  
01100101 00100000 01111001 01101111 01110101 00001101 00001010
```

_Shut off their systems, cut them off from reinforcements. Then kill them. I won't have those intruders in my facility any second longer, _Caroline's voice growled from the speakers. As we had trekked through the facility, turning on her turrets, her neurotoxin, her voice had gotten angrier and more and more human.

By now it was simply seething with rage.

The elevator stopped with a ding. I limped out, arm draped over Wheatley's shoulder. He gripped Shephard's pistol in his hand with determination, eyes alight with a fire that I had seen reflected in mine many times.

I had underestimated him.

He was fierce as I was when I had something to protect.

He wasn't going to hunch and crippled and bow to all the horrible things flying at him. He was going to bend. Flexible, like a willow branch. When you least expected it, he'd spring back, cutting hot, red swaths in the arm of the person that had compressed him.

I hurt too much to smile. I managed more of a grimace.

And slowly, little by little, but by bit, the stone and metal walls of Aprture evolved, twisting and pulsing like something alive. It was like walking into the belly of some giant beast, the red, sticky wall swallowed up the tech, breathing and pulsating with life. Tiny indescribable things skittered around my feet, and I didn't want to look down and examine them.

At the end of the tunnel a world loomed, seemingly only asteroids floating in space, under a cosmic sky, and my brain refused to comprehend it, and I just watched the asteroids soar in tantalizing loops like me, except I always hit the ground, if I went in there I

could just keep flying forever and I would never have to come down.

I didn't know what I was doing. There was no way it was transmitting, it was like something had just grown over Aperture, superimposing its way over the tech-grunge with a thin, sticky membrane. It was part of the building. I didn't know what to do.

Cut.

Her voice was muffled by the speakers, but still there. Would it ever leave?

Probably not.

But I did what I was told like the good little puppet I was. I yanked my machete out, wobbling on tiny, unsteady ankles. I slid my machete into the wall. A hot gush of green-yellow liquid squirted into my face from the wound in the _thing_. Some got in my mouth, and all I could do was sit there. And then it started to feel hot. It just got hotter and hotter, and the feeling of something burrowing, crawling, cutting into my skin like teeny-tiny shards of glass.

It hurt.

I was so stupid. I was so stupid and I should've seen it coming. Was this Caroline's last trick?

I could feel the acid burning me, working its way into my skin. I screamed, yanking off my jacket and using it to wipe away most of the gunk before it got in my eyes.

I spat it out, but I could feel it, burning and hurting and mangling my tongue, searing down my throat, burning it irreparably. And tears were coming from my eyes faster and faster. I couldn't even see Wheatley behind me, black spots were burning my eyes and I knew I had done some irreparable damage and I didn't care because this was a _test _the _last test _and I was going to pass this test if it killed me. I reached my arm up and pulled all my weight on the machete handle, slicing open a hole in the fabric of the monstrous thing that had taken over my world. I hacked and cut and cut, and Wheatley on the other end of the hallway did the same, always following me, and I knew right then he'd follow me wherever he went, his prattling company always welcome, we'd go together to the ends of the earth because we had to.

The thing's cut edges shriveled, blackened, and the living, pulsing lifeform that was this world shivered and retreated from my machete. I chopped and sliced and worked so damn hard. I wasn't going to fail any more tests because there would be no more damned tests.

I was going to topple the queen from her throne.

But first I'd save her face, GLaDOS, the puppet she'd been hiding behind, the Mask she'd used. But why hide behind a mask?

I was distracted by a shrill noise. Metal bending. That world surged forwards with its last life, snatching the metal catwalk and pulling it in, closing one end of its tunnel, trying to trap me.

Me.

I was alone.

Wheatley sat on the other side, reaching, calling for me.

He might as well have been miles and miles away.

And something else swallowed me up. I didn't have time for this. I just wanted to go home and drink tea and pick up the shambles of my heart.

And while the acid still burned my throat, I tried to yell
'sorry'

Instead, it came out as:

"I love you."

His face softened. He was holding the rift shut with his hands only now, face red, sweating bullets.

"I love you too."

And I jumped forward, launching myself off the springs in my boots, and for a second, I flew, and then I was still flying, even as I slid through the gap, smashed into his waist, came barreling into him, holding him tight.

And I was bleeding and he was sweaty and we were both filthy with the grime of another universe, but he was the one who pulled me in and didn't let go. It wasn't the best kiss I'd ever had, not the worst. But it was just as good as any other, maybe better because just hearing the words 'I love you' coming out of his mouth made me feel good, like maybe everything that anyone had said about me was an unfounded lie.

Just like the cake she promised me.

And I closed my eyes and slid down into dreamland, with him holding my hand, lighting the way.

14. Long Time No See

There was no acknowledgement from the godlike Voice. I suppose I wanted somebody to tell me my test was over, that I could go home. Two elevators arrived. We sat there for a moment, staring at the twin elevators, side by side. I didn't suppose it mattered which one I went into.

We chose an elevator at random, and as I sat in mine, I collapsed to the floor, It was as if all my manic energy had deserted me.

But his sunny smile warmed me, even through two layers of glass.

The doors swished shut in unison.

They moved up at the exact same time. It was almost like being put through trials.

Trials and trials and tests until I died.

This was one more. I could beat it, right? It was a puzzle. A test. Even if my portal gun had been banged up one too many times and I had a bullet hole in my body and my shotgun was out of shells and my machete was melted away into nothing by acid, I could beat this goddamn test because all I wanted was to be normal.

And I wasn't just fighting for Harriet anymore. I had saved her. Those monsters would no longer plague her world. Now it was about saving this place. I was going to do the avenging angel shtick, with righteous flame that didn't smell of ozone and gunpowder, but rather of rich, warm wood. This place was going to burn.

And I was going to hold the match. Fire didn't scare me now because I was in control of it. I would laugh as her facility burned. A chuckle came up through my throat, but it hurt. It hurt to even whimper. It hurt to swallow.

The acid had damaged something irreparable.

I was truly mute this time.

I grinned through it, images of flames dancing in my head, the hot crackle of electricity, the snap of metal breaking and melting and _dying_.

If this was what madness felt like, I knew why that test subject went insane. It was a hot, sweet, delicious feeling.

It felt like cake, right out of the oven.

And so, I didn't even hesitate as I knew we were on our way back to the surface, but I had unfinished business here. And I saw something, catching at the corner of my eye.

Blue arrows splattered on gray walls. I brought the heavy handle of my machete down on the glass. I smashed and smashed and broke, grabbing Shephard's crowbar from my sack, even as it was soaked in his blood, smashing, smashing, smashing.

The lights flickered once, stuttered, imitating candle flame, then went out.

Youâ€¦!

I broke through the side of my elevator, immediately began breaking his.

"No, What are you doing? We're so close to the surface; don't make her change her mind! We have to get out, Chell, what the hell are you doing? Stop!" He was screaming at me and he clamped his hands over his ears so he didn't have to hear the bending and the breaking of the facility that he was once part of. I broke through, grabbed his hand, and jumped.

We landed on a catwalk, about a mile down. And I started running. Pale blue arrows cavorted under my feet in a jolly pattern that didn't reflect the atmosphere one bit. And I ran.

Feet clanging on the metal grating, I ran with hellfire behind me. I ran like the devil was on my heels and She was. I kicked open doors, getting lost in a maze of rooms, of catwalks, until a sign flashed above me.

[HUMAN ACCESS REQUIRED]

"Err, why don't we stop to think about this- I mean-"

I slotted the disc into a drive built into the wall. A tiny screen popped up, code rushing past my eyes, and the amber light on the door flicked to green. We ran through.

It was dark. Pitch black, and by walking forwards a few feet, I could feel the cool glass of the opposite wall.

The lights shone into my eyes and I blinked. We were in a small five-by-five room, with a plastic desk crammed up against a wall, a laptop still plugged in and glowing, and a neat little desk lamp. The chair wasn't orange like it should be. A coating of red spilled off the desk, onto the keys of the computer, and bloody handprints were smudged on the walls. Otherwise, just another tiny cubicle in a sea of tiny cubicles.

I turned my head to the laptop, wondering why they had tried so hard to protect this little office.

In the corner of the screen, a video feed popped up. A green-lit metallic room, no, more of a hue, cavernous corridor. I leaned as close as I could, smelling the blood on the keys but scrutinizing the grainy feed.

As far as the eye could see, green pods lay lined up, bubbles rising and catching the light, flashing shots of rainbow before sinking back into the sludge, and in the center, over a bottomless pit ran a catwalk.

I was so close to _something, _I could just taste it, and my thoughts were whirring at a million miles an hour.

Most of the pods lay empty.

A few had old or young humans curled up in cryosleep, but Caroline had gotten to them before I could. Near the head of each human was a row of tiny yellow buttons.

Where was this?

In the bottom left corner, a tiny white text box read:

[REVIVE?]

I gingerly sat in the bloody chair, but the rusty red was long-dried. It made an uncomfortable cracking noise as I sat.

I typed a command into the text box.

[YES]

[CHOOSE FROM STAFF MEMBER PROFILES?] Came the query almost immediately.

"What are you doing there? I'm a bit tired of not being in the loop here, mind if I-" He slid onto the chair next to me. I glared at him, and we struggled a moment before he snatched the mouse and yanked the screen towards him.

"That looks rather ominous, shouldn't you just leave it be? There's gotta be another way out of here, although we're probably stuck, considering you so rudely broke our lift _outâ€¦_" He grumbled. I snatched the laptop back and started to type on the bloody keys.

[YES]

[ENTER SEARCH QUERY: N: A: S:]

[N: A: S:?] I questioned. The laptop whirred quietly, processing this.

[confirmation: Name: Age: Sex:]

I hesitated, fingers twitching slightly on the keys.

I didn't really know where I was going with this. All I knew was that I had to rescue Her. I wasn't leaving without that bitchy AI safely stowed over my shoulder.

What if I justâ€¦|

Transferred her into a human?

I could jam her robot brain into a human body, just like Caroline had done with Wheatley, and then we could leave, and I could save her. I heard her voice in my ears, tone plucking at my heartstrings.

I don't want to test anymoreâ€¦|

Help me

Somebody

Unplug meâ€¦|

That was exactly what I was going to do. I didn't really consider it further. I had picked a course of action, and it was go go go, my puzzle solving brain was going faster and faster, because this was the kind of puzzle I could solve. I grinned and leaned closer to the rank metallic keyboard.

[N: N/A A:30 S: F]

I hit enter. The fan in the laptop took off, whirring so fast it was in danger of flying away. The tabletop started to vibrate slightly.

After a few minutes of nearly exploding, a black, sleek window appeared.

[CRITERIA: A:30 S: F]

A list of people in cryosleep appeared.

At least a hundred that fit the criteria.

I trawled through all the data, names and ages and faces scrolling past me.

Out popped a young woman, black hair in a sleek, neat bob. I clicked. Her face enlarged. Ellen. Ellen [REDACTED]. She was 5'4, amber eyes, Caucasian.

Spotless Aperture record. She was the financial manager in 1989.

A line of text caught my eye:

[NOT a team player]

[condescending and will not work cooperatively]

[discard for cooperative testing initiative]

[test subject number: 2335]

It was the best I could do, considering GLaDOS was an AI. She didn't have a body, as she was ported from Caroline and I was NOT using Her body.

But something dug at me, so I went back to the search field and entered:

[N: GLaDOS]

[no matches found]

[would you like to search the Aperture File Archives?]

I chewed on my lip a moment. The prompt blipped a moment, flashed, appearing again. Before I had time to think, I typed:

[YES]

A tiny orange and blue circle rotated on the screen for a full minute.

[GLaDOS: Genetic Lifeform and Disk Operating System]

[unstable AI]

[abandoned project]

[DO NOT ACTIVATE]

Well, it was too late for that. I chuckled.

[consider for Organic Lifeform Transfer experiment.]

I clicked on it again. Behind me, as if to emphasize like in a shitty thriller movie, Wheatley

gasped.

[redacted]

[redacted]

[Subjects:

James Wheatley

Rick McLain

Colin Hart

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

Ellen [REDACTED]]

[experiment failed. Test subject 2335 was terminated. Transfer did not take. Observing scientist {Caroline [REDACTED]} reported screaming, self-mutilation, extreme violence, and minor symptoms of Schizophrenia. Subject was returned to cryosleep. Do not test. Files to be edited accordingly.]

[Experiment reactivated in year [REDACTED], test subject 10009 {James Wheatley} successfully ported into body. Observing scientist {Caroline [REDACTED]} reported minor head trauma, minor self-mutilation, and slight dizziness. Experiment deemed safe. Level 2 Clearance is required to activate experiment]

I scrolled back to the dialog box. Wheatley reached out his hand, long fingers caressing over his name on the screen.

"Th- that's me! I'm there! It says Organic Lifeform Transfer! Look! And I'm human!" He laughed.

"That's brilliant, that is!"

"H-hey, what're you doing there?"

I typed in:

[activate OLT experiment.]

[specify test subject.]

[2335]

[Transferrable Artificial Intelligence?]

[GLaDOS]

I hit enter. The little wheel spun.

[Subject has been banned from specified experiment. Do you wish to continue?]

[YES]

[Level 2 or higher clearance is required to authorize. Please enter Employee ID.]

Shit.

[1000008]

I typed in a string of numbers and hit enter.

[ID not recognized. Please try again.]

On a hunch, I yanked open a drawer. And another. In the man's desk was a blood-spattered ID card with an almost unintelligible string of numbers. His clearance? Level 3.

[12894008]

[processingâ€¦]

And after a few moments with me holding my breath, the screen brightened once more.

[Clearance accepted. Please proceed to Subject Collection Ward.]

[Happy science!] read the last message. I grinned.

[Query: Directions to Subject Collection Ward?]

A map slid up on the screen. I grinned, slinging the man's ID around my neck and standing up. The route was already memorized in my head.

We had a new friend to meet.

15. End

There she sat, like a sullen teenager, garbed in nothing but a hospital gown, her black hair messy, and she turned her amber eyes on me. Something behind them flashed yellow. She sunk further down in the shabby folding chair, glaring at the glass that divided the waiting room and the cell that she was stranded in, like she might be able to melt a hole in it with her eyes if she tried hard enough.

"Hello." Her voice was less jumpy than the last time I had heard it. It was smoother. More human.

"Are you going to let me out?" She grumped.

"We could just sit here and stare at each other until somebody drops dead, but I really don't think that's why you shoved me into this _filthy _human body and woke me up. So why don't we cut to the chase?"

She breathed in, about to say something. Her eyes slammed shut.

"I am sorry. This is the only time you'll have me degrade myself in

front of _you_, much less the moronic company you keep, so listen carefully." She jerked her chin in the direction of Wheatley. His back straightened, and he flushed angrily.

"Hey!" I placed a hand on his chest to hold him back gestured for her to continue. She rolled her eyes and did so. If there was one thing she liked to do, it was listen to her own voice.

"I am genuinely sorry for being mean to you, not that you don't deserve it or anything, but I suppose one or two of those weight variance cracks were out of line." She sniffed, drew the back of her hand across her face, roughly wiping away tears, trying to pretend like she wasn't crying.

"This is the only mention of this horrible hell you're going to get, Chell Johnson. Cherish it." And she stood, a little shaky on her new legs, and started to wiggle the doorknob impatiently.

"Come on, now let me out so I can burn Caroline to the ground."

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01101001 00100000 01101100 01101111 01110110 01100101 00100000
01111001 01101111 01110101
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It was remarkably easy to sneak into the walls.

There was a dirty, spidery walkway in between the panels, and GLaDOS (Ellen?) lead the way. For someone who had been in cryosleep for ages, her bare feet were sure and steady, and she held herself upright neatly.

Wheatley wasn't relearning movement, he was just clumsy. In spite of it all, I smiled at that. It was almost endearing.

He trailed behind us, unable to move as quickly and surely as either me or GLaDOS, and so he stayed

"Not a moron." He would mumble occasionally.

I smiled, took his hand and helped him along. He blushed a bit. And he opened his mouth to emit nervous chatter, but GLaDOS stopped right in front of us.

Her face spread into an exhilarated grin.

"We're here." She reached out an arm. Down the forearms was a line of barely healed, methodical red scars.

[signs of self-mutilation]

I placed the crowbar in her hand.

"Thank you." She muttered, sliding the crowbar into a gap in the panel.

"Here's the plan. As the genius here, I think I should be the one to stay behind. Orchestrating from behind the scenes, that's my forte. Now, you and the moron rush her and break her body to pieces. I will find flammable oil and douse the place. Comprende?"

I helped her weak arms push down on the crowbar, forcing open one of the many rippling panels on the walls of Her chamber.

She was online.

GLaDOS' head hung on her chassis by a single wire, eye dead. The neck twitched, and she swung around confused and in agony, now that the consciousness she was manipulating was gone.

But as we entered, clutching a measly shard of glass, a nearly empty pistol, a broken shotgun, and two portal guns, her neck spun just as gracefully, extending so she was right in my face. A puff of exhaust wheezed from a vent in her face, stinging my eyes.

You.

I nodded.

What, cat got your tongue?

I slowly, deliberately, lifted my hand and raised my middle finger at her. She giggled childishly.

Didn't I raise you better than that?

I lowered my hand, brought the other one up, smashing the sharp, heavy knife shard into her optic. Electricity crackled along the metal burning me, and I screeched, a painful noise, stumbling backwards.

She screamed too, a loud, jagged yet smooth sound, a robotic noise.

Her head jerked frantically, trying to dislodge the thing in her eye. I laughed. And laughed. I was suddenly struck by a fit of hysteria. My worst enemy, reduced to something silly.

Her voice rasped in my ears (if robots could do that)

I am going to kill you.

I slid off the boots, swung one around, smashing her in the face. She slid up, retreating so she was far away, grinning at me from the ceiling. If she could grin snarkily, she would.

And from far away, a voice snarled,

"_Burn." _The pungent smell of gasoline was strong in my noise. A tube ruptured, spilling clear oil everywhere. The sound of a match being struck made my heart drop into my chest.

Wheatley said it for me.

"No!" GLaDOS stopped mid-motion.

"What?"

"Call the exit lift first! Are you trying to get us killed?"

"No." The lift rose from the floor, right next to us. Caroline

twitched in agony on the ceiling.

"Just me." She walked over next to us, smiling and waving at us, the red scars in plain view. And on the other forearm, a neat 2235 was etched into her arm, all smooth angles. The cut was ugly and purplish in the light.

"A captain must go down with her ship." She grinned again, tears flowing down her face.

"What are you waiting for? You've got a whole life ahead of you. Go on, you two lovebirds."

"What about you?" Wheatley whispered.

"I never had one. I'm living on borrowed time. What's a few thousand years in agony if you can die quickly and easily?" Her face was closed. The matter was not open for discussion. It was the face of a woman who had given up.

'Come with us! Come on, before she wakes up! Go!" And the AI just smiled.

"Thank you for waking me up, by the way. I really appreciate it. I want to see her burn all for myself."

She shoved us into the elevator, and the doors started to close. Wheatley held it open with his hand.

"No. Get her." If I had given up when I wanted to, just sat down and died and squandered my life away, I wouldn't have got everything I have now. I was not going to watch somebody just toss away their life like it didn't matter. NO matter how bad things were, keep going, keep testing, and you'll get your happily ever after or die trying.

She was not going to toss away everything I never had.

I slipped past the doors, wrapped my arms around GLaDOS' waist, extinguishing the match with a quick puff of breath and slipping and sliding on the slick floor, jumped back into the lift. I grabbed a match from her, lit it, and tossed it out onto the floor.

Flames started to slowly but surely lick at the floor and walls, cleansing everything.

She kicked and struggled on my shoulder, nails digging into me, fists pounding, screaming like a disobedient child.

"How can you be so cruel? Let me die!" She tried to hurl herself out the doors.

I shook my head and the lift started to rise. The sky was so close. And the purifying flames flickered and burned at Caroline, but she was too terrified to scream.

So long, Mother.

I won't miss you.

And I grinned as hellfire burned and blackened and consumed Hell itself.

I had burned my fears to an unrecognizable crisp.

And I stopped running. I just stopped. My aching limbs thanked me as I collapsed, exhausted. There was nothing to run from anymore. I smiled fondly over at GLaDOS, asleep on the floor, tears still making soggy tracks down her cheeks.

And the dark night sky engulfed us. The lift let us out into the cool night air. And we started walking, in no particular direction.

We made an odd trio, emerging burnt and bloody and beaten from a tiny mine shack, one of us asleep, the other two grinning like maniacs.

There was literally no context you could put this in and have it make any sense.

We just walked. Strolled, even. Just like two people out on a walk. We weren't going anywhere. We were strolling, meandering. And did it matter? We could go anywhere. No walls to bind us. We were free.

And the crickets chirruped, a serenade worthy of a much less odd-looking couple.

But I'd take it.

And I had a feeling he would, too.

And everything was still. My mind had stopped moving quickly, stopped analyzing, stopped solving, all at once.

I was at peace.

And the crickets serenaded us as we walked away.

16. Epilogue

[457 days, 12 hours, 16 minutes laterâ€¦]

The air was stifflingly humid.

I leaned my weight on my foot, sawing deeper into the wood. I cut another plank, handed it to Wheatley, who fitted it in place in the patchwork of wood that only loosely fitted the term 'floor.'

Neither of us was particularly handy, so I suppose it would have to do.

He grinned up at me, and I gave him the thumbs-up. He clambered onto the new, shiny floor of the new, shiny log cabin across the clearing from the old shack.

I waved to GLaDOS, and he smiled at me around the nails she held loosely in her teeth. She had taken it as her task to patch up the tin roof. There was moderate success, judging from the fact that I hadn't heard any swearing or cursing in the last twenty minutes, and

nothing particularly breakable had been dropped, although the companion cube did have a brief skydiving experience.

Luckily, I was fast on my feet.

Now, with the floor and the walls done and sanded and ready, the windows fitted, the shiny tin roof set up I was devastatingly bored.

She drove the last nail into the wood, brushing her shaggy black hair out of her eyes. She pulled the brim of her floppy sun hat back from her face.

"Do you want to go swimming?" she called. I nodded. She gathered her dress around her hips, and slid down off the roof, landing on the ground with almost no noise, like a cat. Now, free from her prison, her movements were sure and smooth, no longer robotic and jumpy. Her skin was tanned. The scars were almost invisible.

And she smiled.

It was hard to believe I had once hated her.

Wheatley tapped her on the shoulder, pointing in the direction of the pond.

"I'll race you!" They tore off, laughing like idiots through the woods.

After a hesitant moment, I followed them.

My gun stayed on its secure pegs above the door. There was nothing to fear from the woods or anywhere else, for that matter.

I was safe, and, dare I say it, happy.

I sat by the lake, feet in the water.

Slowly, little by little, I dozed off with contentment written plainly on my features.

[memory complete]

[searching...]

End
file.